

Chapter 1

A Tale of Two Monicas

Learn: My “habit story” and how rediscovering who I am outside perfectionism led to a reclamation of my life, and eventually my habits

Three kids in, I was a shell of “Monica.” On the outside, I could play up the performance of being a capable person, a loving and devoted stay-at-home mother, but on the inside, I was raging. The near-constant simmering anger was the most surprising part of motherhood for me, and I felt awful about it. Most of the time I could keep it at bay, but then I’d find myself blowing up over the smallest of things—from haughtily sweeping up crumbs I didn’t make, to literally crying over spilled milk, to having an epic “mommy tantrum” over bubbles. Yes, bubbles.

The kids and I were in the tiny backyard of our old home in Northern California. I sat in a patio chair, patting the back of my infant while monitoring my older two children playing. In an effort to create some fun for them (since I most decidedly wasn’t ready for any out-of-the-home adventures), I had given them both

a small bottle of bubbles. It was going fine, until my oldest—then barely four years old—accidentally emptied her bubbles all over the two concrete steps leading to our house. I congratulated myself for calmly getting the hose and simply spraying off the slippery solution—no chiding needed.

But then, I heard a scream. And it was coming from inside the house.

I ran in, frantic to locate what must have been a near-death emergency only to find my daughter panicking in her shared bedroom, standing over yet another spilled bottle of bubbles. But, this was no ordinary bottle—this was the giant kind, the kind meant to refill the tiny ones. And it was nearly empty, the solution decidedly soaking not just the wool rug but the old wooden floors underneath it.

I single-handedly went to work on fixing the situation, still clutching my young infant in one hand while I used the other to haul a bucket of water and a pile of towels into the room. All I could think of was money. If the wool rug was ruined, we couldn't afford a new one. If the wood floor underneath the rug got warped, we couldn't pay to repair it.

So, I scrubbed, as quickly and as strongly as I could with my only free hand. But, instead of the solution soaking up into my rags, it lathered and grew. Mini mountains of bubbles began to form and reach higher and higher, wider and wider, until they matched my growing despair. My internal monologue bled into a dramatic performance, one fit for the stage. I found myself wailing, "I'm the **ONLY** one that can do this—the **ONLY ONNNNNNE!** It's always on **ME!**"

As I scrubbed, I screamed. I was barely aware of my children at that moment. The spotlight had zoomed in on this life-or-death plight: me versus bubbles. That is until I happened to look up. There, in the doorway stood my four-year old and my two-year old with frightened faces. When they saw my gaze fall on them, they audibly gasped, then sprinted from the room.

I slumped back on my heels, stunned. I didn't just scare my own children, I scared myself.

This was one of many moments that pushed me to rethink what I thought a "good" mother was. Perhaps the pursuit of self-sacrifice was not just costing me, but also my children, of having a happy home. In my pursuit to embody an impossible ideal, I didn't recognize who I had become.

The "Monica" I used to know was capable, kind, and persistent. She was creative, smart, and ambitious. She was calm, thoughtful, and hard-working. I wasn't the type to throw a tantrum over bubbles. So, why was I? The truth was actually quite simple—it wasn't the crumbs, the milk, or the bubbles; it was that I wasn't taking care of myself.

How could I have been? With my husband, Brad, working long hours with a similarly-long commute into San Francisco, I was essentially the *only* active parent of three very small children, states away from my family, and without a dime to spare to get outside help. I didn't know it yet, but in the coming years two of those children would be diagnosed with multiple special needs. I was hopelessly sleep-deprived—that's a given—but I was also deprived of time *to* and *for* myself. Beyond my exercise regimen, there was no self-care to speak of. And even then, working out looked like pushing a double-wide stroller at breakneck speed, six miles at a time. (This isn't a humble brag! You'll learn in Chapter 6 how I ended up paying a steep price for this practice.)

With so much to be done and only me to do it all, I showed up. I showed up for the kids. For the meals. For the laundry. For the floors. And, heck, even for the toilet. But, I didn't show up for myself. Gone were the self-care moments I used to enjoy, gone were my hobbies of art and creativity, gone were my once-steady habits of journaling, goal making, and reading.

There was simply no time—no time to get lost in a novel, to sew or to copy a creation from Pinterest, to paint my nails with crummy drugstore polish, or to even sit down on the couch and

watch an occasional episode of *The Property Brothers*. My choices felt so clear: show up for my responsibilities or show up for myself. Only one or the other. So, I chose my responsibilities over myself.

That was until I saw the frightened faces of my children watching me melt down from their bedroom doorway. It was clear all at once that my self-sacrifice was hurting those things—those people, really—I was sacrificing myself for.

It was this experience that pushed me to find a new way, one that differed from the model of perfection I originally thought I had to follow—not just as a mom, but as a woman. Perhaps there was a way to choose my responsibilities *and* myself?

Thanks to the advice of a new therapist, who immediately targeted my perfectionistic tendencies, I started small. I made a list of 30 things I wanted to try before turning 30.¹ This was not another list of goals to achieve or resolutions to fulfill, but a list of exploration, of self-discovery. I read a novel. I sewed a seat cover for an ugly second-hand settee. I wrote long and now-embarrassing personal essays on a blog that nobody read. I ogled modern art at a museum. I tried a new kind of oatmeal. And I shoved all of this into the cracks of my days or I did it with my kids literally hanging on me. Sure, the house was a little dirtier and the mountains of laundry were a little higher, but I wasn't crying over spilled milk anymore. And that was just the start.

None of the items I crossed off were worthy of front-page headlines. And yet, prioritizing that list changed my life because it helped me put myself on my *own* list. It didn't just give me back time, it gave me back *me*. Little by little, doing *something* on my list reminded me of who I was and pointed me toward the breadcrumbs of who I wanted to be. Because the point of the list was exploration, not completion, I was allowed to be bad at things—it was okay to fail, it was acceptable to be mediocre. Doing so not only showed me that it was possible to grow outside of my

¹My community now knows this list as the *Do Something List*, aka DSL.

perfectionistic, all-or-nothing (mostly nothing by then) tendencies, it also weirdly gave me more confidence.

That list turned into a years-long experiment of what it looks like to progress for progress's sake. I began sharing about this idea and my experiences with it online, and eventually interviewed others about their own journeys as well on my new amateur podcast, *About Progress*. It was another venture I was allowed to be bad at just as long as I was trying.

For the first time in my adult life, I was working on my personal growth for richer, truer reasons—not to meet prescriptions or achieve accolades, and not because I *should* be, but because I was *choosing* to. In the process, I was finding “Monica” again in ways that felt like a sort of reclamation.

Bubbles to Bowels

The early fruits of this reclamation became clear as I encountered a real-life drama, one that far exceeded my performance with spilled solutions. Instead of bubbles, this spectacle involved bowels. Yes, bowels.

A few years after that incident with the bubbles, I was due to have our fourth child—another boy. Thanks to years of scraping together our pennies, we were finally able to embark on a “cheap” kitchen renovation leading up to his birth. Since we were trying to do as much as we could ourselves, and because we had no idea what we were doing, a lot went wrong. *A lot.*

As most renovation stories go, the timeline and budget doubled. The people we originally hired for a few big things made costly mistakes, the kinds where you fail every inspection and have to rip out what they did and start all over. We figured this out on December 23, and our baby was due February 3. Our kitchen was an empty hole with everything stripped down to the studs. There were no walls, no insulation, no piping, nothing. Oh, and no contractor or hired teams to finish the job.

Our home was 1,200 square feet, so the “renovation” (really, a travesty) disrupted every part of our lives. Our single bathroom was our only source of water, and its tiny countertop where I tried to cook with the instant pot and electric griddle placed *just so*. Thanks to our laundry appliances being removed as part of the renovation, Brad had to haul our giant laundry bags to and from the laundromat late at night after work to spare my now heavily pregnant body the duty. Every inch of our home was covered in a fine layer of dust, no matter what I did.

And we were going to have to bring a newborn home to *all* that, now with no end in sight?! There’s a picture from this time that Brad likes to tease me with from Christmas day that year. I’m sitting on the floor, slumped against the couch, belly bursting my non-maternity jacket to the seams, my face drained of all life and energy. I was the kind of “stressed and depleted” you can’t hide.

Thankfully, *one* woman answered my plea for help on a random local mom Facebook group, saying her handyman husband (also a certified contractor) would be able to work with us. In the month before our baby’s birth, this man fixed all the others’ mistakes and got us to the drywall stage, something I’ll forever be grateful for. We were able to get floors in and drywall, too. Our Ikea cabinets were delivered just in time for us to begin to assemble.

My baby was a few days overdue—a first for me—and we were set to head in to get induced as my prior births had been scary fast. (I did *not* want to accidentally give birth in the aisle of a Safeway grocery store.) The day before our induction appointment, our only toilet in the house started pumping sewer water into our home, and then our only car got stuck at the mechanic’s. I hired a plumber, we borrowed a car, and Brad’s parents kindly watched the big kids so we could go and have a baby.

After a smooth labor and a short hospital stay, we brought him home. I remember sitting on our couch holding his warm body, stroking his white-blond hair, admiring his perfect lips, and never feeling more grateful for walls and floors. It didn’t matter that we

didn't have a kitchen with running water, cabinets, or counters. We were warm, and we were safe. (Also, we had a working toilet again, hallelujah!)

Brad went back to work a few days later and my mom flew in to sleep on our pullout couch, helping me with the big kids so I could recover from birth—aka paint cabinet doors in the garage while the baby napped. At nine days old—Valentine's Day—my mom and I could both see something wasn't quite right with my baby.

He seemed like he was in pain, but not the normal newborn gas kind of pain. His little tummy would scrunch up hard, just like his face, and he would wail like he was getting stabbed. He wouldn't eat, couldn't sleep, and he occasionally spit up electric-green fluid instead of the typically sweet-smelling breast milk. As the day wore on, I felt a growing foreboding feeling, despite the fact that his symptoms were dissipating and he got a decent night's sleep.

The next morning, I called my pediatrician with my concerns and she wisely sent us to the hospital for testing. While kind, the radiologist told me her X-ray showed our baby was fine. I insisted they try other tests, a kind of boldness I rarely embody in a medical setting. The third—and most invasive—test was ordered and quickly prepared: an endoscopy, where a camera was inserted into our baby's throat and down into his gastrointestinal tract.

The moment the camera met its mark, the doctor became urgent. She finished the test quickly, rushed a nurse off with instructions, and gravely told me, "Your baby's bowels are twisted and he needs surgery right away." I asked her if he would die if we didn't do it immediately. She nodded and firmly said, "Yes."

While I waited to be escorted to the emergency room (ER), I held my baby for what could be the last time. He was calm now, his pain somehow abated. He couldn't nurse because of the surgery, but he wasn't eager to anyway—his little tummy was already full with bile squeezed up from his twisted intestines. I called Brad and told him to come as fast as he could from San Francisco. I took a few pictures of my little one, some with my face scrunched right up next to his so I could always remember the two of us, together.

The next few hours were a blur, starting with a spectacle in the ER room while they prepped our baby for surgery. I can see it all now in a sort of haze: needles struggling to find tiny, dehydrated veins, heated doctors shouting at each other over protocols, me begging God for a miracle, and a pediatric anesthesiologist performing one. Brad swooped in the minute before they were to escort our little one away. He got to hold our baby, saying his own sort of potential goodbye. Together, we experienced the feelings of seeing your newborn taken behind doors and walls you can't follow, of the worries plaguing your waiting on the other side.

The next time I saw my newborn was in the pediatric intensive care unit. His face was puffy, his lips were dry—but he was alive. I counted the number of tubes coming from him and the monitors tracking every vital. And I fell into a hesitant relief.

Six days later—much sooner than they thought we would—we brought him home again. My mom had thankfully extended her stay and had worked on assembling the cabinetry, alongside a kind neighbor and the handyman, who had come back to assist in our time of need.

I was back again in a dusty home and a kitchen with no cabinets, no counters, and no laundry, sink, and faucet, but now with four children under my care, including a baby recovering from a life-saving surgery. My mom needed to head home, and Brad had no choice but to return to his long hours at work. Again, I was the only one. I had to do it all. It was all on me.

And yet, this time I felt like I could.

Though I was stressed, exhausted, and overwhelmed—I felt like *myself*. I was still “Monica.” I was capable, kind, and persistent. I was creative, smart, and ambitious. I was calm, thoughtful, and hard-working.

I could meet these challenges. I could do what needed to be done. I could show up. Not just for my people and this difficult time, but for myself, too.

Why? Why and how could I do this when the stakes were so much bigger, so much weightier than another spilled bottle of bubbles? It was all thanks to recent years of learning who I was again and putting myself on my own list.

Only the Beginning

When I came home from the hospital for the second time with the same newborn, I didn't know it yet but this was only the beginning. It was just the start of me learning how to reclaim my life, choose progress over perfection, and feel like myself.

Fast forward eight years later, I can honestly tell you that most of my life looks the same. I now have five children, many of whom have special needs. I am still the primary parent, caring for our kids and home in the many mundane (but vital!) ways running a household requires. Money remains limited. I deal with stress, insecurity, and occasionally depressive and anxious seasons.

However, while my life looks mostly the same, it *feels* completely different. Because in even better, deeper, and more practical ways than after my baby almost died, I am “Monica.”

I credit that not only to how I reclaimed my life outside of perfectionism but also to how doing so gradually expanded to how I do habits.

There is much more to say on that last bit (obviously!), but I'll leave it now with this truth: while unique to me, my tale is a collective one.

A Call to Rebel

From bubbles to bowels, we all face hardships in our lives. They come, they go, they stick around. The only way to get through life and not be lost to it all is to reclaim our right to a life that reflects the woman living it. When we feel centered and supported, we can be ready, willing, and able to show up for ourselves, our people, and

our responsibilities. Because at long last, we count ourselves as one of them.

Women can't show up as the leaders they are if they continue to follow the perfection-bound prescriptions passed down to us. So to truly begin, we have to do something that might initially feel shocking: rebel.

TAKEAWAYS: I share my own origin story of learning to reclaim my life, choose progress over perfection, and prioritize myself again. Thanks to doing so, I was able to *be* myself during hard times. This work eventually translated to habits—stay tuned for the next chapter!

TAKE THOUGHT: When was a time that you forfeited yourself for your responsibilities? How did perfectionistic models of being a woman create that experience for you?

TAKE ACTION: Ask yourself, “Do I think I only have two choices: me or my responsibilities?” Consider what would be different for you if you made space for *and* instead of *or*.

NOTE: For more (printables, recommended books, complementary podcast episodes, etc.), remember to check out the free and included Sticky Habit resources, available online at <https://stickyhabitsbook.com/resources>:

