

Morning Routine

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The toaster smells burned, she thinks. The smell is even stronger than the smell of the fresh paint she put on the walls yesterday. When she saw the paint in the morning she hadn't been impressed. It was supposed to turn out a light green but now looks more yellow. She turns around and switches on the radio to distract the silence a little bit. She does not like silence in the morning. Silence lulls you back to the dream you just escaped from, she thinks. While the toaster burns her toast, she picks some ginger from the cupboard and cuts it into slices. She doesn't like ginger tea, but they say it is good for you. Chris never cared if food was good for him or not. He never ate or drank anything that was supposed to be good for him and so he went on. As she pours the steaming water over the now skinless ginger she looks down. Zoya has been screaming her furry heart out at her. Like every morning. She tries to ignore it. The cat has been fed. It just wants to play. It always wants to play but right now she doesn't have the time, she thinks.

The toaster shoots up the bread and she picks it out with a knife. The toaster is too big for the small slices she uses, and they just don't reach the top to be picked out by hand. One side of the toast is burned. The smell of burning toast is something new to her, she thinks. Back home she never had burned toast for breakfast. Back home her mother had bought a quality toaster that let you adjust heat perfectly and so toast back at home, a plane-ride away, was always perfectly golden and crispy. She scrapes off the black side of the toast with her knife and tries not to scatter the black crumbs everywhere, but they fly around like ash carried by the wind anyway. Once the toast looks edible, she turns to the fridge. She doesn't want to use butter, so she takes the low-fat cream cheese. She only ever eats butter back at home. But then, she thinks, is this her home

now? She spreads the cream cheese on the toast like she spread the green-yellow paint yesterday. A new flat would set things right, she had thought. Her gaze drifts to the window. She has to eat standing because the kitchen is not big enough for a table or chairs. The living room has no table either so she just leans against the kitchen counter and looks out of the window. Outside the day is grey. It is a February day in May. The new flat makes her look out on a graveyard that harbours many rabbit families, but right now she cannot spot a single one of them. They were probably still asleep, she thinks. She cannot blame them. A young couple hurries past her window with their heads bowed against the wind. The man wears only a shirt and no jacket. She feels the urge to drop a sarcastic comment and tell him that he will catch his death if he is so careless. Why does his girlfriend not say anything to him? She would have certainly scolded Chris for being so headless. He would have dropped a cheerful comment of being used to it. The couple disappears from her window. The cat still screams. She ignores the cat and sips the tea she doesn't like. A couple of weeks back she had thought that a new flat would make things better again. She decides she wants another toast and pushes the bread as deep into the toaster as possible. She asks herself if she eats too much but she wants the toast anyway. She had believed that a new morning would bring a new bright day and yesterday would disappear like the rabbits in the graveyard had disappeared. The morning had not brought a better day, or a better her. It had just brought the usual routine of burned toast, the radio, the screaming cat, clouds, and memories.

Judge's comment:

'Morning Routine' is written with mature restraint and sensitivity. Everyday details are used skilfully to build a strong sense of atmosphere and emotion. It captures the sadness and bewilderment of recent loss with delicacy and tact, avoiding melodrama and sentimentality. It's full of subtle, well-observed touches that give a moving (but unspoken) insight into the main character's emotional struggles.