

## Evening Routine

**Brenden Kimpe**

Franklin Foster is a very particular man. Each morning, before he departs for his corporate insurance job, he follows a strict, set routine; of which he has been stuck within since he was able to get ready for school without the help of his mother. Immediately upon awakening at 6:00 a.m., he rushes to the bathroom to brush his teeth with industrial strength toothpaste that leaves his molars glistening. Mother had always said he must brush his teeth first thing in the morning. Besides, he likes the sting of peppermint upon his slightly cracked tongue, but even more so, he loves the paralyzing sense of fridity that he gets from drinking an ice-cold glass of water afterwards. He relieves himself for the first time of the day while drinking. The tandem intake and output of liquid leaves him feeling exhilarated.

The next box to be checked on Franklin's morning routine is breakfast. At 6:10, he creates a hole in the center of a piece of bread with the same glass he drinks from and plops a jumbo-sized egg into it once the pan is hot enough. Franklin munches his breakfast while standing at the counter and sips a glass of pulpless orange juice. He nibbles around the egg filled toast and when only the center remains, he shoves it into his mouth, breaking open the gooey yolk with his tongue. There's never any variation in his breakfast, as he feels that consistency is the spice of life. He doesn't let his breakfast dishes touch the table—that's reserved

strictly for lunch and dinner—and lets them rest beside the sink. At 6:40, he starts the electric kettle and prepares a mug of green tea. Franklin despises coffee because it tastes like mud. Bean juice. But the little boost from the caffeinated tea is plenty enough to get him riled up. This morning routine has been conducted in his tighty-whities, but thankfully he now gets dressed while sipping from a hot mug.

Franklin looks out the window upon his idyllic neighborhood after he finishes dressing. The sun has almost risen, and he sees that his neighbor across the road, the Parsons, already have one car missing. Good old Mr. Parson is already on his way to today's construction site while the wife is left home to wrangle the kids. Franklin feels sorry for the woman. He would never leave his wife to such functions, but then again, Franklin doesn't have kids. He doesn't have a wife either. The closest he ever came to that stage of his life was when his mom had offered to go to prom with him in his junior year of high school. That was only after he had gotten too many rejections to care anymore. She did things like that, and Franklin remembered her for it.

He departs for work after finishing his tea, backing out of the one car garage connected to his small, ranch style home. The wheels hit the asphalt of Pine Drive at 7:15 and never go above the speed limit. The workday for Franklin is filled with mundane tasks and assignments once he arrives at the office by 7:45. For the average person, an occasional box of donuts in the break room or the bi-yearly fire drill would make up the more exciting ventures at Johnson & Feder Insurance. Franklin is not an average person. He takes joy from stapling hundreds of papers a day or fixing the jammed printer because they're low stakes assignments. He's a trusted man at Johnson & Feder. But he always avoids the post-shift conversations or invitations to the local bars or BBQ joints because he has a routine to get to, one that even considers the twenty to thirty minutes of post-work traffic he is sure to encounter on the way home. If he arrives early, he waits in the driveway.

When the clock strikes 4:30 p.m., Franklin goes inside and completes his afternoon chores. He handwashes his morning dishes that were left in the sink because the dishwasher would inevitably become filled with the detritus of long forgotten meals. Dishwashers are nothing but a treasure trove of bacteria and Franklin relishes the feeling of soaking his hands in warm, soapy water, especially when it softens the food enough to squish between his fingers. Since today is Thursday, he tosses

in a load of laundry and begins cooking dinner at 5:05. He turns on the television in the living room so that he can listen while cooking. Later, he will lock eyes with its screen until he finishes his meal at 6:00 p.m. In more ways than one, Franklin Foster was also a very peculiar man, as this routine had remained largely unchanged for nearly twenty-seven of his forty-six years. That is, until tonight.

Franklin was stirring the slightly browned ground beef on the stove, acutely listening to a bumbling contestant on tonight's episode of *Wheel of Fortune*, when he heard a faint scratching noise coming from the laundry room. The stirring ceased. He listened for a moment longer, but there was nothing. He began stirring again and turned his mind towards the prize puzzle. Tonight's contestant had the opportunity to win an all-expense paid trip to Barbados. The wheel of good fortune rattled in the living room accompanied by another, more foreign sound.

The scratching had started once more.

Again, it stopped when he did.

A faint chill ran through Franklin's body and the hair on his arms stood at attention like good little soldiers. He walked briskly into the laundry room and turned on the light. The washing machine was slowly pulsing towards the end of its cycle, and the air was tinged with the sharp scent of detergent. There was nothing here, but Franklin had to be *sure*. He allotted exactly seventeen minutes in his evening routine for such distractions. Occasionally he would turn away diligent girl scouts spouting the lowered prices of cookies or devoted Jehovah's witnesses looking to berate him about their god, sparing only seconds if he could. This was no different.

The scratching picked up again, and he noticed that it was coming from behind the washer. He pushed his hamper to the side so he could get a good look at the back, hoping it was nothing but a quick mechanical fix. He stuck his hands into the dark crevice between the wall and machine and nearly screamed with surprise when a mouse darted between his kneeling legs. Franklin spun around just in time to watch it skirt the corner and head towards the kitchen.

He let out a slow moan.

No. No no no. This can't be. A mouse was sure to bring a slew of distractions and inconveniences. Mother always claimed that mice were a sign of disorganization and filthiness. A horrid memory resurfaced where she had released one into Franklins room once when she felt it

wasn't cleaned to her satisfaction. She had held her body against the door and laughed in triumph as he yelped in fear. He simply didn't know what he would do if he couldn't solve this issue in a timely manner. He scrambled to his feet and followed the direction of the mouse, coming to a stop in the middle of the kitchen. The ground beef was still bubbling on the stove, the spurting clack of the wheel of misfortune came from the living room, and a slight scratching noise escaped the cupboard beneath the sink. He wrenched open the doors and began pulling cleaning solutions, sponges, dish soap, and spare rags onto the floor, subconsciously noting the time it would take to replace them. A beam of light reached perfectly into the back left corner, and that's where Franklin got his first good look at the face of his demise.

The mouse was small and a sooty brown. It panted heavily in the corner as it stared into Franklin's hazel eyes with its own beady black ones. It looked scared; terrified, even. And for the slightest moment, Franklin felt a sense of pity cross into his emotional threshold. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was 5:28; there were only fourteen minutes left in his designated distraction window. Anger and frustration returned with a vengeful flare and Franklin found himself crawling under the sink. His outstretched hand intending on squeezing the mouse until its own time had run out.

He was inches from enacting death when the mouse sprung. In a sudden bold move, it jumped onto his hand and skittered up his arm. Franklin felt that he no longer saw fear and desperation in the mouse's eyes, but instead, determination, grit, and possibly worst of all, a plan. It blew past his ear in a brown blur and jumped off his shoulder, landing squarely behind him. Franklin jerked with surprise, letting out a real scream this time, and slammed the back of his head into the underside of the sink. There was a muffled crunch. His final thoughts were how stupid it was to be so scared of a little mouse and that the ground beef on the stove was going to burn.

There was a wet sensation soaking the left side of Franklin's face. He groaned yet kept his eyes shut. He was coming out of a long and nightmare fueled dream. He had dreamed that there was a mouse under his sink. That it was disrupting his evening routine and getting up to no good. Thankfully, the dream had ended right before his dream-self had felt confident enough to reach for the damned thing. He would never touch a mouse. Mother always said they were foul, disease-ridden crea-

tures. His eyes cracked open, but he couldn't see a thing. The world was black. No semblance of light or color reached his tortured retinas, so he panicked. He didn't immediately jump up—some inert part of him said not to do so, of this he was thankful—and instead raised his head enough to get a whiff of what he had been lying in. It was the sharp and impeding scent of multi-purpose cleaner that burned the insides of his nostrils. The kind that was advertised as lemon scented but was more like an inbred cousin of one. He slid out from under the sink in a reverential daze. The dream hadn't been fictional after all. It was an inconceivable nightmare that came back to him in horrifying clarity. He attempted to stand but was brought back to his knees by a pounding ache in the back of his head. He ran his fingers through his hair and found a soft spot that when touched, sent arrows of pain into the backs of his eyes. His fingers came back sticky. While remaining motionless, piecing together what had just happened to him, a voice spoke from within the gloom.

"I was beginning to wonder how long you would sleep. You were starting to worry me."

Franklin looked around him, still panicking at his blindness when it became clear. It was no longer midafternoon in the Foster family home. Quite the opposite. As if on cue, the blurred outlines of furniture materialized before him and the windows in his kitchen allowed the soft glow of the suburban night into the house. Franklin had lost hours underneath the sink. There was so much he was supposed to have done. The car needed to be put in the garage, a shower had been lined up, dinner was in the middle of cooking! He reflexively spun towards the stove and winced in pain. It all rolled in grandiose waves that began at the back of his head and broke upon his brow.

"Don't worry. I turned off the stove so your dinner wouldn't burn. Although it wouldn't matter much since you won't be eating tonight."

Franklin was sure that he had been imagining the voice at first, but its presence was irrefutable. And yet, impossible. He looked around and saw no one. Not a shadowy figure, disembodied head, or floating ghoul hovering in his vicinity. Yet, there was the presence of something else. He wasn't alone.

"H-hello? If you're really there then show yourself. I think I need to go to the hospital." Thinking was an understatement, and he wouldn't be able to do much more of it if he didn't get help soon. Movement had inevitably broken the weak clotting that had taken place during his

impromptu snooze, and he could feel the blood trickling down his back, snaking along his spine and soaking the elastic band of his tighy-whities.

The voice clicked its tongue in disapproval, "Oh poor Frankie. Did you bonk your wittle head?" Franklin froze and trembled with fear. His eyes were widening, the blood-soaked hair on the back of his neck rose in apprehension. His hands grew white as they clutched his knees. He recognized that voice but simultaneously knew it to be impossible. He rejected the very idea. What he did know was that someone was there, and that they knew he was hurt yet didn't care. They were *toying* with him. He attempted to muster an authoritative voice and scare away the intruder.

"Who's there? Tell me right now or I'm calling the police. If this is your idea of a prank then I don't find it very funny."

"This is no prankie, little Frankie. Why don't you face me when I'm talking to you? It's the polite thing to do." The voice was soft and cooing, lulling him into a state of mind long forgotten, locked into the deep recesses of his mind.

He knew he shouldn't go along with this. Nevertheless, he replied, "I don't know where you are. I can't see you."

The voice suddenly took on a new dimension, condensing into the side of the room that held the stove. It was whistling for attention, "Yoo hoo, over hereee." Sitting atop one of the burners, perfectly positioned in a beam of moonlight, was the damned mouse that had started it all. It sat perched on its haunches, back erect with its hands dangling by its sides. Its ears were cocked towards him and its whiskers stood deadly still. Not even its nose twitched. One would think it was nothing but a figurine if not for the gleam of its eyes. They were black all the way through. So dark that they were nearly purple, and so deep that they reflected the entirety of the cosmos with indifferent boredom. They bore into the soul of Franklin Foster, through his own widening pupils. He broke and turned toward the floor.

His eyes brimmed with tears. This couldn't be happening, not to him. He would look back at the spot where he had imagined the mouse and find it empty. The vile creature would be gone to whatever depths of heaven or hell it had fallen or climbed from.

He risked a glance and saw that it was still there, unmoving, and he quickly looked back to the floor. It was his refuge in this time of crisis. His tether to reality that he was clinging to, desperate not to fall into a

bottomless pit of insanity. Fat droplets of blood had begun to fall there, curving around his downturned head and dripping off his nose and lips. They mixed unhappily with the tears that had begun streaming out of his eyes.

"What's the matter? Mouse got your tongue?" The mouse giggled at its own witty comment, sending a shiver through Franklin. The voice was soft and sickeningly sweet, but the laughter had come from some deeper unspoken place, full of bass and malevolence.

"You're not real. I know it. You're just some fucked up thing that I'm seeing because I hit my head." Franklin began babbling to himself, hoping to air a degree of comfort to his unraveling mind, "You've had a serious accident, Franklin. You bonked your head up real good and now you're imagining a mouse that speaks, with your own mother's voice, no less. You need to stand up and call 911. You need help." But Franklin couldn't get himself to work up the courage. He had frozen in this kneeling position, prostrating at the feet of his own madness.

The mouse spoke up, "You are in desperate need of help, Frankie, but not due to your head. Oh no, you're in much deeper trouble than that. But you don't need me to tell you that, do you?"

Franklin gave up trying to imagine that this was some cruel vision, some sick play directed by his own mind starring his long dead mother. "What do you want?" He cried, "If you're here to kill me, then just get it over with."

The mouse laughed heartily now; a booming roar that echoed through the kitchen. "Why, what a fine idea! But no, I'm not here for that. It's only fun for a moment."

"Then what do you want?" the question was laced with terrified curiosity. He desperately needed to know what it wanted. What it needed so that he could satisfy it in any way he could.

"Why should I tell you? Wouldn't that spoil all the fun?" The mouse disappeared from the stove and materialized before him, moving much too quickly for his aching eyes to see. "Why don't you sit down. Get a little more comfortable for me, why dontcha?"

Franklin suddenly realized how shaky his knees were. How much blood had pooled between his feet. Slowly, he squatted and plopped onto his backside. His head pounded in protest while his legs cried out in relief. The mouse was sitting now, too. Resting back with its tail curled around its sprawling legs. It was mimicking him.

The mouse spoke first, "So, how was your day?"

Franklin's resolve wavered at the simplicity of the question, nearly resorting to a scream of confusion before mumbling that it was fine.

"Aren't you going to ask how mine was? Conversation is reciprocal, you know." The mouse held no discernable expression, but its eyes conveyed a smugness that irritated Franklin to no end. Was it truly here for conversation and conversation only?

"Fine. How was your day . . ." Franklin paused.

"Ms. Mouse is fine. I prefer the formality."

"How was your day, Ms. Mouse?"

"Why, I'm so glad you asked," Ms. Mouse replied brightly, "It was going swell. Good food, nice weather, I even decided to clean up my house a bit since it was Thursday. You know, just *routine* stuff. But then this guy decided to scare the shit outta me. Can you believe that? I actually thought he was gonna kill me." Ms. Mouse paused, "And you were going to kill me, weren't you, Frankie?"

"Of course I was. You're a mouse living in my laundry room. It's only natural."

Ms. Mouse feigned shock, gasping dramatically and putting the back of its hand against its forehead, "How very macho of you. The big strong man playing at exterminator." Ms. Mouse got up and approached Franklin, waltzing delicately through his puddle of blood and leaving a trail of perfect footprints. "Didn't it ever occur to you that *I* was also worried about it? A human, of all creatures, infesting my house and claiming it as their own. How disgusting." Ms. Mouse spat on the floor. "I've been trying to get rid of you for years."

"Years? That's impossible. Mice don't live that long."

"Do I look like a normal mouse to you?" Franklin thought that yes, it did look like a perfectly normal mouse. But upon further study, he discovered that Ms. Mouse was no mere stereotype. Its eyes faced forward rather than to the sides. Its hands bore useful looking thumbs longer than the rest of its fingers. The sooty brown fur atop its head was longer, coarser, resembling something more like hair. Human hair.

"No, you don't look normal. You're anything but." His eyes had to be deceiving him. Just a moment ago, the rodent in front of him had looked perfectly natural aside from its uncanny ability to speak. Now the hair atop Ms. Mouse's head was growing longer by the second, extending past its bony shoulders and stopping right above its hips. The fur

on its face was also changing; being sucked in through enlarged pores that gaped in the now visible pale skin. Its teeth remained frozen in the rodential buck-toothed grin that screamed insanity. He had only seen one grin like that in his life. Now it began, no. No longer it. She began to grow by writhing unnaturally as bones cracked and skin split into grander versions that took the place of the old. Breasts that had been remnants of his childhood memory sprouted in front of him, teasingly perky with their youth before deflating into the aged specters that were features of her final years. She stood before him, large and imposing as a caricatured imposter of his mother, occasionally jerking or twitching this way and that as her metamorphosis neared its completion.

Franklin sat before his mother, offering soft whimpers when sounds crept out of her body that he refused to acknowledge. She towered, hands on hips, and laughed at his gibbering.

"You really thought you were hot shit, didn't you?" Franklin didn't reply so she continued, "Day after day I busted my ass making sure you had the childhood you deserved. Did I get anything in return?"

Silence.

"Don't give me that shit. I was sick of it then and I'm sick of it now. But you got me back didntcha? And you know exactly what I'm talking about. I did *everything* for you. I got rid of your father, gave you the structure and order that you craved, got you into a good routine. I even let you stick your—"

"Stop!" Franklin screamed, "Please stop. I don't want to hear this; I'll do anything you want me to but just please stop it. I can't take it."

Ms. Foster's voice lapsed back into the soft coo that it was when the night began, stretching out her words, "You waited until you knew for sure I couldn't fight back. I always knew you were a coward, too much of one to take on your mother when it was fair. You know I couldn't leave that alone. You knew I would be back even after you tossed me under the crabapple tree with less of a ceremony than a family pet."

Ms. Foster continued ranting but Franklin was spent. Burned up. Tired and defeated. He no longer spoke or protested when she continued her monologue. He was trapped inside a Freudian nightmare of epic proportions and couldn't wake up. He didn't utter a sound when she slapped his cheeks or splashed water on his face. He wasn't there for any of that. He was gone. Losing sight of the routine, Franklin's time finally ran out.

Yellow tape encircled the front lawn of the Foster household. Red and blue lights washed the front of the Parson residence in their sterile glow while droves of characters walked about with their tasks lain before them. One of the Stern County detectives walked up to his colleague, fishing for clues.

“Hey Jim, how’s it looking?”

“Oh, you know, pretty bad one this time. Gonna be a while before I get this stink outta my shirt.”

“You’re telling me. I haven’t even been in there yet.”

Jim was surprised, “Really? Well, you better steel yourself up real good then. It’s quite the scene.”

“I know he was dead for a couple days, but it couldn’t be that bad, right? I’ve seen my fair share of cases.” Hal was a bit skeptical about Jim’s insistence on the extreme nature of the situation. He had been working for Stern County for almost fifteen years now and had seen a variety of cases that would give anyone the heebie-jeebies. There was one time when the abusive husband of a young lady had grabbed the wheel of the car as she was driving and steered them off into a telephone pole. He was still in the car groaning that he didn’t mean it, but one half of his wife was about fifty yards in front of the other. Another time he had gotten a call out to Milltown on a homicide involving a teenage male. Hal had later found out from the boy’s therapist that the boy had apparently been having some strange dreams which resulted in him going off on his family with his dad’s flathead screwdriver. All but one of the fingernails on the boy’s mom had been pried off, premortem too. Regardless, Hal took Jim’s words to heart. He had also been working on this type of stuff for a few years now and wasn’t someone to shake a sore finger at.

Hal could smell him before he opened the front door. That sickly sweet scent that told the nostrils “yes” while the brain screamed “no.” The man—Franklin Foster, according to the report he had read on the way in—was lying on his kitchen floor. He had been melting into the linoleum because, for some reason, the air conditioner had been turned off even though it was the end of August. Hal didn’t think that Franklin was too bad, considering the circumstances, until he got a good look at his face. His stomach grew queasy, and he had to step out for a few minutes. Jim wasn’t kidding. It was clear that Franklin Foster had a bit of a rodent problem.

If you've ever read a book or short story that was so scary it knocked your socks off, **Brenden Kimpe** would like the recommendation. When he isn't reading or writing, Brenden enjoys cooking, listening to music, watching movies, and fawning over his cat, Marceline.