

The Nightly Pass

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My toothbrush stand has three slots. Mine's the blue one, always leaning slightly to the left, bristles splayed like a weathered paintbrush. Morning light catches the dried water spots. Sometimes I straighten it, but it finds its way back to that tilt, like it's learned something about comfort that I haven't figured out yet. Not everything needs fixing I suppose, though that is a hard truth to let settle.

I pick up the brush, muscle memory already moving my hand in familiar patterns. 'Small circles,' Mom used to say. "Like you're drawing tiny moons." Back and forth is easier, it gets the job done when the day feels heavy. But the dentist says that's how the same spots get missed, over and over, until one day they're beyond repair. These patterns don't announce themselves. One skipped morning blurs into another, each small 'just this once' becoming its own kind of rhythm. The toothpaste tube sits squeezed from the middle, despite years of being told otherwise. Some habits resist even the most determined morning resolutions.

Routine becomes ritual on good days. Cold water. Mint paste. The familiar motion. One-two-three... fifteen... forty-three... The count to one-twenty becomes a meditation, each number a step toward completion. Some days the numbers flow easily, like water circling a drain. Other days they tangle around sixty, dissolving like toothpaste foam, and I must start over. Sometimes good enough must be enough.

Between splashes and steam, I catch fragments of myself. Eyes, nose, chin, and there—that same worried expression Mom used to get when checking

behind my ears. It's easier than seeing the whole picture at once. The mirror holds quiet truths in the morning light—dried toothpaste specks mapping rushed moments, water spots charting days when a quick rinse felt like enough. Clarity comes and goes, like steam on glass. Some mornings, what I see makes me turn away entirely, the reflection too honest for 6AM conversations with myself.

The toothbrush stands untouched this evening, bristles stiff and dry. I tell myself it's just this once, like the stack of unopened mail or the unfolded laundry. Small skips that pile up, creating their own kind of pattern. Tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow I'll remember that two minutes is not that long, unless you're watching each second tick by, waiting for the pattern to break.

Up and down, each motion mapped from childhood persists despite the gaps. The trick is reaching those back corners where shadows gather, turning into spaces we pretend not to see until we can't ignore them anymore. Even when the simplest routines feel like mountains, the body remembers.

In the end, it's straightforward: grasp the handle, start the motion. The challenge is not in the technique or the time—it's in those mornings when even small victories seem distant. But there's something about that clean slate feeling, how it carries forward even after the brush returns to its crooked home. The brush settles back into its familiar tilt, water droplet sliding down its handle like a quiet full stop at the end of another day. Maybe perfection is not in standing straight, but in returning, again and again, to the small rituals that keep us whole.