

Pennies Only

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Lynn likes their new apartment. She does. It's bigger than any home she's ever lived in before. Usually, she's got sweatshirts and quarter-filled perfume bottles and dog toys stacked up around her bed like a nest. Here, there are empty corners. She's never had empty corners before. Admittedly, they scare her. She wants to pile books into them. She wants to buy a snake plant—the mother-in-law's tongue—and have it live there. They don't require a lot of sunlight.

The walls, too. They haven't put anything up yet. He's really more of a minimalist than she is. She feels the need to make a mark to make it hers, expand so big that there's not room for anything else. Some people need to fill a space like that.

When he's not home, and the dark is falling, she turns on all the lights in the apartment. The living-room reading lamps, the sconces by their bed, the pull-string above the bathroom sink, even the little one attached to the kitchen vent. She does not tell him that she does this. When he calls, once he's emerged from the underbelly of the subway, she knows she has seven minutes to turn the lights off. She just doesn't want him to think her wasteful, or afraid of the dark.

When Adam comes home, he shuts the door politely behind him. They are in the stage of living together when every gesture is gentle, when you walk into a room and think, “This is mine,” to remind yourself. He removes and hangs his jacket, calls out, “Marco?” (And she, “Polo!”) Before the new cavernous place, they crammed into her studio for a little while, until the lease was up. They said Marco/Polo there too. It was funny. It was a studio, you see. One room. There was nowhere to hide.

Lynn finds small spaces romantic. She honestly wouldn’t mind as little space as possible. She just needs to adequately fill the space she’s got. On trains and planes, she’ll take the middle seat, no problem. It’s something Adam loves about her.

Other things Adam loves about her: the way she lovingly calls her dog Trash King, the way she calls his last walk for the evening his Last Chance. (Every night, another Last Chance.) But perhaps the thing Adam loves most about Lynn is the way she’s always talking, to him, to herself, to the dog, at the very least, always saying something under her breath or absentmindedly singing at a mumble.

When she’s not home, Adam plays a nonstop queue of music. If he’s feeling boisterous, he syncs the music up to the speaker system, lets it flood through the halls. When she’s not home, he thinks about live radio and the way they call the silence dead air.

And then she comes home. Another Marco/Polo. Their days are shaped like this for a little while. For the first small stretch, nothing happens. They wake together. They go to their jobs and have small, solitary adventures, rocks in the river, before converging once more. They take wordless turns emptying the recycling bins. They bump elbows in the kitchen while reaching for the saucepan. They expect new intimacies but find the ones they have to be sufficient. They take Trash King for his Last Chance.

And then one night, maybe nineteen or twenty days into their new, conjoined lives, they find the gumball machine. Yes, the gumball machine. They do a double-take too. It’s right outside their new building, dragged out to the curb for garbage day. It is a yellow from your childhood. There is a note attached in careful hand: FREE. PENNIES ONLY. Trash King urinates on the trash bags nearby.

Adam wants to take it home immediately. He’s excited to have the first thing that is theirs. Yes, they have furniture—a loveseat and an artist’s stool and a few bookshelves—but that furniture had been Frankensteined from their former lives. Trash King too. He’d been hers first.

Cleaning the gumball machine proves to be a very therapeutic task. Adam mixes vinegar and Dawn dish soap into their big dollar-store bucket and begins scrubbing from the base up. They take turns with the rag. The whole thing reminds Lynn of a science fair project from her youth—seeing which liquids lifted the rust from pennies. (Orange juice and lemon juice worked best. Milk and water alone did nothing.) Every time she drinks orange juice, she savors the acidity, imagines it cleaning her insides. All the bad scrubbed away, everything that was tarnished—gone.

Adam is good at getting the grime off of things, good at getting down to the core. He isn't afraid to roll up his sleeves. It is something Lynn loves about him.

The couple moves the gumball machine all around the apartment, testing it in different rooms. The natural state of it, of course, would be full of gumballs.

"Perhaps in the kitchen? It would be fun for the kids," Lynn muses.

"We don't have kids," he reminds her, and she feels an incomprehensible loss at that, the death of their imagined children. She feels like something deflating.

She also suggests turning it into a terrarium, filling it with succulents or air plants or, heck, even a goldfish if they could stop up the opening. It makes him sad to think of the thing repurposed, forced into a second life.

There is an uncomfortably long, L-shaped hallway in their apartment, between the kitchen and the bathroom. In the listing, this uncomfortably long hallway was called a dressing hallway. In theory, the broker told them, you could fit a rather large full-length mirror here in the corner. For lack of a better place, it is here that the gumball machine makes its home. It fills an empty corner, which satisfies Lynn.

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The next day, something strange happens. Lynn comes home to find a gumball in the mouth of the machine. She turns on all the lights. She phones Adam, who is underground. When he comes home, he calls out, "Marco!" and she is silent. He finds her sitting cross-legged at the machine's feet, transfixed, as if in worship at an altar.

No, maybe worship is the wrong word there. There's something serene to Adam about worship. Resolute. It conjures images of church with his youth group: clear hierarchies, a distinct god. What Lynn is doing more closely resembles the

desperate curiosity of prayer. The difference between prayer and worship is asking for something.

The thing Lynn is asking is how. “How did this get here?” she asks, when she feels him touch his palm to her back. “How is that possible?” She spends the evening searching: “old gumball machine mystery,” “gumballs magically appearing,” “gumball machine trap door.” Adam cleans the thing again. He soaps up a bottlebrush and pushes it into the gullet of the machine.

On this second cleanse, Adam finds a label they had missed on the underside of the base. The paper is browned, the adhesive barely sticking, but they can see plainly that it reads: MAY CONTAIN LEAD PAINT. “That’s awful,” Adam says, imagining a child dying of slow poison. “Chilling,” Lynn agrees, thinking of a mother who thinks herself a good mother. “But they didn’t know better then.”

The machine takes on a new life to them. It occupies the space in a greedier way. The yellow paint appears darker somehow, tinged with something else. It was like hearing something disturbing about a recent dinner guest, that they’d hit someone with their car on a dark and stormy night or that they had once served a sentence.

Adam suggests that they take a walk. He leashes Trash King, and they round the block. Something the couple has gotten into the bad habit of doing is peering into other people’s windows. They appraise bookshelves, chastise lighting choices. They pocket ideas for their shared life. They note weight gain and loss, comment on a family’s perceived closeness. They throw their voices into the throats of other couples, ventriloquizing fights they are too afraid to have themselves. It was something they started doing before they lived together, a little like practice.

They had gotten quite attached to this one couple who lived on the ground floor of a building two doors down. From the street, you could see into their living room, the walls of which were lined with tacky old movie posters. Our couple is taken with them, riveted by the slight, perceptible shifts in their environment and all that they implied. Recently, that couple had pushed a small worktable up against their front window. Most evenings, they could be found sitting there, facing each other, with their laptops between them. Tonight, it was just the woman sitting there alone, still dressed for the office and with a glass of red. They played their game, played at god.

“She’s working late,” Adam says, stating the obvious.

“And he’s out with friends at Dive Bar,” Lynn ventures.

Trash King sniffs at the grass.

“He’s going to get home later than she’d have liked.”

“She’ll already be asleep.”

The woman makes a gesture like a cough.

Trash King pulls at the leash, impatient with them both.

When they get home, Adam takes care to wipe the dog’s paws off. Lynn lives a comfortably cluttered life, but she draws odd lines around cleanliness. She appreciates that he is somehow tuned in to the station of her inner monologue, her peculiarities and all. It is something that she loves about him. She closes the blinds, and off they go, somersaulting to bed.

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Another day, another gumball. This is the pattern they come to know. They throw the gumballs out (not wanting pests), but the next day, another one shines in its place. The weekend rolls around, and they sit in the hallway to study the machine. It’s nice to spend the day together like this, he the light and she the living air. At around four o’clock in the afternoon, a gumball slides through the slot by no mechanism of their comprehension.

Adam, a man always grasping for the rigid facts of life, becomes convinced that they are imagining things; it’s a joint hallucination brought on by a gas leak. The super comes, begrudgingly, on a Sunday. He checks their stove, inspects each burner for something off-kilter, shuffles the oven out of its roost and peers over the edge at the vacant spot. He confirms that nothing is wrong. He is quick and brisk and Adam makes a mental note to leave him a generous tip around the holidays.

For a while, it offers them only gumballs. They don’t see the harm. “Some couples have cockroaches or pantry moths,” Lynn says. “This is better.” They get used to it. Like the fire we take for granted, and the silver touch of invention. Much like love, the way everything gets swallowed up into normalcy eventually.

And on and on. They wipe their muddy shoes on the front mat. They echo Marco/Polo. They throw out mail that isn’t addressed to them, though they know they shouldn’t. They nod off with podcasts playing and accumulate an absurd number of disposable chopsticks. Sometimes Trash King sleeps in

the narrow alley between them, a gutter ball. They turn the dish soap bottle upside-down when they need to make it to the weekend. Sometimes they play the scratch-offs and it all more or less evens out, which is to say they win and lose like most people.

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Adam has a hard time sleeping soundly through till morning. Sometimes, he'll get up on two, three occasions in a single sleep cycle. His fingers itch to turn the radio on, but he resists, night after night, not wanting to call Lynn back from wherever she's dreaming. He sits in the silence. He's submerged awkwardly inside the non-sound, like it's a big pool, and he's the only one swimming.

When Lynn sleeps, she makes little back-of-the-throat sounds. She does it when she's reading to herself too. "I looked it up once, and it's called subvocalization," she told him. "It's a thing." It sounds like the words want to come out. He yearns to reach in and pull them to the surface, like colored scarves in a magic trick.

Lately, Adam finds himself awake-walking into other rooms in the dead of night. On this night, he putters over to the fridge and stands bathed in its mystic light, a personal moon. The cool air feels nice on his bare legs. He stands there awhile and ponders over the expression "dead of night." It's an odd phrasing, Adam thinks. Why not the aliveness of night? The night teems with life. He wishes Lynn were there. The night breathes and wanders and contemplates more than the day. The day is impatient. The night waits. The night smooths. The night does the difficult job of coaxing things to the surface.

When Adam finally closes the refrigerator door, even in the dark, he can make out the cheesing smiles of his friends. Lynn and Adam are, after all, at that stage of life when they get a lot of save-the-date cards in the mail. What does it mean to save a date, anyway? It sounds unnecessarily cavalier to Adam. To rescue it from the jaws of being just another day—to wrestle it from the crushing skull of your everyday life.

For lack of a better place to store them (and because it seems like something people do), the couple keeps the invitations on their previously pristine stainless-steel fridge. All the faces of their friends/family and *their* better halves stare back at Adam. Pretty soon, they'll all be procreating, Adam thinks. Then they'll be

hanging kid art on the fridge. When did this become the trophy case anyway? He used to be able to see his own reflection dimly in it.

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They decide they are too old to host a big, raging housewarming party. Besides, their neighbors are families with young children now, and they don't want to be seen as *those kids*. They settle on an intimate dinner instead. They'll invite four friends, they decide together, because that's roughly the number of people who will fit around their coffee table.

Adam goes to the nice supermarket and picks up grapes, five different cheeses, rosemary garlic crackers, and wasabi peas for good measure. Also: red, white, *and* rosé wine—give the people options, he thinks. (Plus, Snack Pack pudding cups, but that's a treat for Lynn, after everyone leaves.) Meanwhile, Lynn spends all day pruning the dead leaves from their myriad of houseplants and vacuuming and re-vacuuming the rug. (Trash King sheds with abandon.)

When their friends arrive, they ooh and ah. It is the price of entry. They sit down around the coffee table, and everyone surreptitiously sneaks a few pieces of hard cheese over to Trash King, each thinking themselves sly and a friend to all animals.

"It's really amazing," one friend says.

"It's perfect!" another chimes in.

"Good cheese," a third asides.

"Really, much better than your last place, Lynn."

"A step up." They touch glasses.

One friend runs off to the bathroom, and when she returns, she's asking about the gumball machine. "Where did you get it?" she asks, the question intended as a compliment.

So Adam and Lynn get to relay their story, trading off lines like in a play. "Okay, but the crazy part is, gumballs keep coming out of it," Adam says at the end.

"Yeah, right," a friend says.

"No, really! It's the weirdest thing!" Lynn prompts.

"You're pulling our leg!"

"We're really not."

“This is another one of your bits!”

“Gumballs,” the cheese-eater says, her tone like flat soda.

The conversation goes back and forth like this for a while. The longer it presses on, the more Adam and Lynn feel the need to defend what they know to be true. It’s not that their friends would ever out-and-out call them liars, but disbelief clouds their eyes. For the rest of the evening, friends take turns going to the bathroom for abnormally long stretches of time, shaking their heads upon return, making a show of coming back empty-handed, when they think their hosts aren’t watching. A few gently touch the arm of whichever host they are closest to and make prolonged eye contact as though meaning to convey some deeper message. Their frozen smiles remind Adam of the faces on the fridge.

At the end of the night, when the last guest has parted, they shut the door and sigh communally. Lynn slides the deadbolt into place, punctuation on the day. Adam rolls up his sleeves at the sink and begins rinsing out wine glasses. “They didn’t believe us,” Lynn says. At sinks across the borough, their friends are having mirror-image conversations with their significant others, debriefing the oddities of the evening.

Lynn and Adam don’t have much company after that. When they meet friends, they go to *their* apartments, or otherwise to neighborhood bars and restaurants. It happens less and less, with weeks then months cropping up between plans. They vow to stop talking to other people about the machine and say things like, “At least *you* get it.” It’s really something that brings them closer together, binds them to one another.

“Hosting is stressful,” they tell each other. “Our apartment isn’t really big enough anyway,” they say. And in this way, Lynn and Adam close the curtains around their relationship.

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And then they come home one day to find not one gumball but a few. This doesn’t seem terribly alarming, except for the fact that the mouth of the machine is only so deep. At the arrival of, say, four or more gumballs, they start to push each other off, lemmings on a cliff.

Lynn starts to turn the lights on in the apartment. Adam gets on hands and knees and starts picking up the runaways. For a couple that had lived with the

machine like it was no stranger than a slightly temperamental faucet or a slow, glugging drain, this isn't really a big deal. And then Adam finds one with bite marks in it. They aren't particularly deep, but they definitely puncture the surface. The dye of the gumball, too, has lost some of its intensity, like it had been licked profusely. It gives the impression of a marble and now holds varying shades of blue, bleeding out.

Trash King is asleep on the loveseat. Honestly, he seems perfectly fine. His chest rises reliably; his paws twitch under the heaviness of his slumber. Not so much as a chipped tooth.

"That's Trash King for you," Lynn says, a mother who thinks herself a good mother.

"Still, we ought to take him to the vet," Adam says, scooping him up.

Lynn loves Adam for his tenderness toward her dog. They wait for the cab outside, and she feels adoration when looking at him, now all blankets and extra limbs. And yet, she can't squash the rising pang of guilt. Where was the maternal instinct? And quieter: why is it easier to love something that isn't yours?

As it turns out, Trash King is fine. They have a hard time explaining to the vet what exactly happened. They have a hard time explaining to anyone exactly what happened. Besides, neither of them really has people to tell anymore. It evens the playing field, puts them on even footing.

The vet gives him something to make him throw up, and they spend the evening coaxing him off the rug and onto the tile when he makes a retching sound.

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That night, Lynn has a dream. First, there is a disembodied ringing, like an old telephone. She is in their new apartment. In the dream, she steps quickly out of bed, not wanting to wake the baby, whose sudden existence she does not find strange. It feels natural, really.

She follows the sound, and of course: it's the machine that's ringing. She didn't know it could do that. She is surprised even in her dream. Which end is the receiver? She leans in close and speaks into the mouth of the machine.

—Hello? (tentatively)

There's a little bit of static, and then it's her mother, a voice beyond the grave. Lynn does not find this surprising.

—Evelynn? Evelynn, how are you? Settling in okay?

—Mom? How did you—

There's more static. No, maybe it's more of a light plinking sound, metal hitting metal.

—You never call.

—How could I?

—Exactly! How could you! My heart, my own.

The static sounds like pennies, loose change being slotted through.

—Evelynn, I think I have someone on the other line. Can I call you back?

And Lynn wakes up. The machine isn't ringing. (She checks, twice.) There is obviously no baby, but Trash King has made his sickness known at the foot of the bed.

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In the morning, the couple is awake earlier than usual. The light climbs up the walls like ivy at this hour. They feel they have found a kind of Eden. After all, when a man and a woman are in love, do they not always feel like the first?

They fling the windows wide, and they sip orange juice from the same glass. They feed Trash King rationed amounts of kibble, breathe relief when he can keep it down. Lynn pulls up the area rugs and prepares the soap bucket, while Adam finds just the right album. They scrub away all evidence of anything gone wrong.

Later, Lynn runs Trash King around the block. She passes their favorite apartment, peers in. The couple is entertaining friends. There are no laptops, only plates and plates of food between them. Today they've brought out the champagne flutes for mimosas, and they throw their heads back when they laugh. Lynn watches awhile, thinks about the front rooms of people. The couple is sitting side by side for once. The man in the window touches the small of her back, noticeably, a couple of times. Ah, the parlor trick of love.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Adam is thinking about how taking care of Trash King is probably not unlike taking care of a baby. He did not expect to feel this, a kind of puffed-out-chest proudness. What could he say? There was something about the small, dependent warmth that sleeps between two bodies that woke him. A family, then. Something to fill, like those customizable bumper sticker outlines. They don't have a car, but they could have a stick figure family.

On Sundays, Adam rises early. He stopped going to church in his adolescence, but he never could shake the habit of getting up with the sun. He is careful not to shift the tides of the bed, though he knows it doesn't matter; Lynn sleeps like she's in another place.

He ambles his way over to the bathroom, pees, splashes his face with water, and scrapes flecks of dried paste off the mirror with his thumbnail. On his second pass through the long hallway, he sees the tooth.

Yes, there in the mouth of the machine (where else would a tooth be?) is a single molar. It's so small, it must have belonged to a child. Despite its minuscule size, there is a certain sturdiness to it. Is it a tooth with a cavity? You might wonder. It would make sense, given that it's sitting in a candy dispenser. But no, the tooth appears perfectly intact. A startling white. He feels the strange urge to touch it, to hold the small, sharp thing in his hand. He wants to make contact, to know that it's real, to test its strength, to see if it could pierce skin.

Adam isn't sure how long he's been sitting on the floor of their hallway when he hears Lynn come creaking out of bed.

"Marco?" He loves the sleep on the rim of her voice. And then she's crouching next to him, her elbow to his shoulder. She's so close he can hear her breath catch.

"What is it?"

"A tooth."

"Right. Sure, sure. And it was just here when you got up?"

Adam nods.

"At what point do we call someone about this, do you think?"

"Who would we call?" He kisses her forehead.

"My mother," she jokes. She'd told him about the dream. Well, parts of it.

It feels wrong to throw the tooth away. They establish that much. It sits on the coffee table now (on top of a take-out napkin) while they eat half-mushroom, half-pepperoni and don't take their eyes off of it.

"What if it's an offering of some kind?" Lynn asks, ever the optimist.

"Or a warning?"

They both want to bring up the baby issue, but both are too afraid. Lynn wonders if there's any part of her that brought this on, summoned it. She feels that it must be something inside of her, something inherent. In the body, ingrained. She scans the dark corners of her mind to find something that makes her deserving of this kind of haunting. Adam, on the other hand, looks out. There he is, on the

other side of the glass. What if the machine is listening to them somehow? The way Walgreens will send you targeted coupons for baby formula and attire a few months after you purchase a pregnancy test—not quite a haunting, but a sinister surveillance. Look, there they are: a man who fears being seen, and a woman who knows all the rooms in the house.

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The tooth ultimately goes into a snack-size Ziploc bag and in one of the drawers of the kitchen, the one that held only unused sponges in the three-pack and all those disposable chopsticks. They never open it.

As for the machine, they watch it with careful, wary eyes. They step quickly past it whenever they need to cross through that hall. Days go by, then weeks. They're relieved when it starts to offer them gumballs again. It's amazing how quickly people get used to things.

An uncertain amount of time passes. There's a birthday somewhere in there. And a job loss too. A career pivot, if you will. More Marco/Polos than anyone can count: the luck of having found anything here. The only new life comes in the form of potted plants. They make a mossier of the windowsills. Hair collects in the shower drain and dust bunnies creep into the corners. The couple goes through two cheap handheld vacuums. A plate breaks (by accident). A plate breaks (on purpose). More Last Chances. Some nights they fall asleep with the TV on and two fans running, and it is reflected in next month's ConEd bill. They wash the bathmat after all this time, and it comes back a brighter color than they remember—little astonishments, the spice of life. Someone grows a beard. Someone gets bangs. (Both are mistakes.) Lynn leaves the lights on; it's her one small, domesticated secret. Trash King tears through plush toys, leaving stuffing in his wake. He prances around the apartment showcasing the kill. He guards the squeaker pulled from the body—in another life, the heart of the thing.

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Money is tight. This is what Adam thinks on his walk home. What an odd expression! Money is tight! He finds that it's not so much the money that's tight as it is the feeling in your chest when you don't have it. Between student

debt and the rent, water they pull from their boat with paper cups on the first of every month.

He passes their favorite couple on the way. Today, the lights are off. Adam steps a little closer. In the not-quite-black din, he can see that the walls are empty. He doesn't like that he can see the yawning shape. It would've been less unsettling, Adam thinks, to stare into the pitch black. It's disconcerting when the colors of life are not so vivid as you imagined them to be.

When he gets home, he says to Lynn, "Our world got a little smaller." He says, "Our favorite couple is gone." She considers this. You know the feeling—like when a guilty-pleasure show goes off the air. On the one hand, was the loss really so great? On the other, yes.

Lynn wonders if their favorite couple ever peered into their windows. She wonders what they saw, if they noticed the slow evolution of their wall hangings from pushpins to real frames—if it looked like growth, like a home coming into itself.

That's how Adam feels about the relationship sometimes, like it's something he's got to grow into. He worries that it looks like he's playing pretend, like these marks of adulthood hang around him, a too-big suit.

That night, in the stretch between shutting off the light and dozing off truthfully, the couple hears the distinct slap of metal against metal. It's a cold sound. It reminds Adam of afternoons whittled away at the arcade, the optimistic clink of a cup of gold tokens. He slides his slippers on as he gets out of bed—this Lynn remembers, that even under the threat of intrusion, her man will always be the one who observes some semblance of that pristine normal order.

In the hall, the machine spits out pennies. Adam picks one up, turns it over in his palm. He has an impulse to check all of their years. He's reminded of something his mom told him once, in his youth. She said that pennies made in 1943 were of a rare and special metal. She offered him a crisp five for such a find. Just knowing that fact laid a film of excitement for Adam over everything—just thinking you might find something more valuable than promised.

In the morning, Lynn walks Trash King to the bank to procure the brown-paper coin wrappers. In her absence, Adam turns on the radio. People are calling in for advice. It takes a certain kind of person to believe they are worthy of airtime, Adam thinks, but he relishes their desperation and good humor all the same. A woman is in love with a man in love with another man. A mother is

nervous about her daughter going away to college. A man wants a blessing or a psalm or something, and the host tells him it's not that kind of show. Then the weather: there's a storm coming.

Well into the early stages of afternoon, Adam and Lynn sit on the floor and roll the offering into neat columns, pillars on which to build a life.

"How much?" Adam asks, once the last one is done.

"About \$5.75." Lynn rolls the papered coins between her palms.

"Do you think it would make us sacrilegious to spend it?" Adam is thinking of shitty corner-store coffee, maybe a box of orange Tic Tacs.

The pennies go in the kitchen drawer, slowly sliding into one another alongside the tooth.

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Not long after the pennies, Lynn is at home. She feels guilty about the electric bill, so she sits still with all the lights off. She is practicing. They are eating away at their savings, she knows. There will be nothing left for winter. She loves Adam. She wants this to work. Compromise, sacrifice—this is the picture of it. A woman alone trying to get comfortable in the dark. Lynn listens to the rain drum up against the window and remembers a trick from her childhood. Do you know how to tell how far away a storm is? You count the seconds between the lightning and the thunder. If there is time separating them, you're miles away from the center—safe. If they chase one another closely, you're at the heart.

Lynn coaxes Trash King out from under the bed. He doesn't like storms. She tells him there's nothing to be afraid of—he has a roof over his head now. This refrain seems to offer him very little comfort. A nervous ball of energy, he dashes out of the bedroom, and in a flurry of whining and whimpering, books it to the long, L-shaped hallway.

Here comes Lynn skidding after him, following the click of his claws on the hardwood floors, the rooms lit ever so briefly by the tease of lightning. They've lived in this apartment a few short months, but it is not enough time for Lynn to have imprinted the exact corners and contours of the place.

First, she feels the cool texture of the glass fishbowl against her skin. Then she hears the collision of glass and wood. All Lynn knows for sure is the shock of the ground quick beneath her.

Trash King comes out of hiding to make sure she's all right. He crawls into her lap as she reaches for the bigger shards.

There had, previously, been a few close calls, of course. But they more or less had trained their everyday bodies to maneuver around the machine when it wasn't the main object of that moment's attention, the way you ignore what is actually kind of precious.

Adam would be devastated.

She half-expects gumballs to explode into the room. She can't remember if they have glue in the house.

Lynn and Trash King sit on the floor like that, she with a fistful of glass, both of them looking up at the splinters of the sky. When it started, the claps of thunder came from farther off, toward the park, but she finds she can no longer identify the source. She's swimming in the sound. The seconds are closing in.

In the distance, a key clicks into place. "Marco," Adam says, the rainwater and the dark he finds himself in both heavy, clinging to his clothes. It's when she opens her mouth to respond "Polo" that she realizes she's been holding her breath, waiting for something to happen.

