

Foils

The way she is standing at the kitchen counter reminds me of the way Amanda used to. She stands with her feet together, one hand stirring the pasta and the other tucked under her hair. Every few minutes she leans over the pot and the steam billows up in front of her when she blows on the water to keep it from boiling over.

Amanda didn't stand like that at all. She couldn't even cook.

She catches me staring.

"It's almost ready," she says, crossing the linoleum to the kitchen counter and kissing me lightly.

Her kiss used to make me forget. Now all I do is think about the difference; about how Amanda used to chew her bottom lip, leaving tiny indentations. It was a nervous tick, and that is the reason I currently have several unopened boxes of chewing gum in the pantry. When she left, I didn't know what to do with it all. I've had to increase my own chewing gum habits to avoid suspicion.

"You keep another woman's chewing gum here?" I could hear her asking.

I tried throwing away a box every week. But the pantry began mysteriously replenishing itself. Trying to be thoughtful, she was buying more gum to support the habit she thought I had. As a result, I've become nearly as addicted as Amanda.

"Could you set the table?" the sound of her voice brings me back.

"Sure," I say, and then, after a moment of staring into the drawer, "I forget, do you use a spoon for your pasta?"

She laughs.

“Are you going to ask me that every time?”

“Sorry,” I say, getting just a fork out.

“Ben,” she says, turning away from the stove, “we’ve been seeing each other for eight months.”

I nod, staring into the open drawer, keeping my back to her. I feel her arms slip around my torso from behind and her face rest on my shoulder.

“It’s just a spoon,” she says into my back, sending little vibrations through my t-shirt. “Do you at least know what I drink with pasta?”

Thankfully, I know the answer to this question.

“One glass of red.”

She leans up to kiss my ear, but the pot boils over and she hurries back to make the steam billow up to the white, bumpy ceiling.

After dinner she falls asleep on the couch in front of the television and I become restless. I get up, careful not to wake her, and pace the kitchen, straightening the dishcloths and putting away the dishes we washed and dried earlier. Opening the pantry door, I take the opportunity to remove one of the boxes of chewing gum. There are five left and I’m not sure how I’ll ever get rid of them all.

I step outside, quietly letting the screen door latch back into place, and walk along the side of the house to the trash cans. Opening the box of gum, I take one of the packs out and examine it. Amanda always bought spearmint. We had entire arguments over why I thought cinnamon was the better flavor. I tear the top of the package and remove a

stick of gum. Setting the rest of the box and package on top of the trash can lid, I remove the foil from the stick carefully.

“It’s foil, not porcelain,” I used to tell Amanda.

“I need it to put my gum in once I finish it,” she said.

Putting the stick of gum in my mouth, I fold the foil up and put it in my jeans pocket. I have the usual awkward moment trying to condense the stick into a chewable mass as the initial flavor tingles across my tongue.

“It’s not that I think spearmint is *bad*,” I used to say. “It’s just that cinnamon is so much more exotic.”

“You just like the color red. And besides, sometimes it’s nice not to be exotic.”

She was right, of course.

Already the flavor is starting to fade, so I grab the pack of gum and remove another piece. I sit down with my back against the house, staring at the neighbor’s fence as I chew the two pieces of gum. Amanda always reminded me not to swallow the gum, since she’d read some study that showed gum takes seven years to digest. I always wondered if two pieces together, then, meant fourteen years. Then three sticks would equal twenty-one years, and so on.

There are twelve pieces total. I unwrap them one at a time, adding each to the clump in my mouth. Every wrapper gets folded into a tiny square and shoved into my pocket. The humidity is forming beads of sweat on my skin.

I stuff the last four in all at once. They cling to the other pieces in my mouth and all of a sudden I begin swallowing the gum. I tilt my head back, resting it against the vinyl siding, and try to separate the wad into smaller bits with my teeth. A little scrape at

a time, I whittle away at the mass, gulping down each mint-flavored strand. I can feel a little saliva, or is that sweat, dripping down my chin. The next ten minutes are a grueling marathon of chewing and tearing and swallowing. I can't help but think of how long that gum will stay in my stomach. At twelve sticks and seven years per stick, I'll be digesting for just shy of eighty-five years. I'm twenty-seven years old.

I will die with gum in my stomach.

I laugh at this thought and almost choke on the remaining bit in my mouth. After one last chomp, I gulp it down. I sit for a few moments, savoring the overpowering mint flavor that is all over my lips and tongue and teeth. I can smell it and it reminds me again of her lips.

"I miss you," I say, my head still tilted back.

When I get up to go back inside, I throw up some of the gum into the trash can. I stay leaned over, wiping my face and eyes with my hands and staring at the long, green strand lying on top of the garbage. Grabbing some newspaper from the recycle bin, I cover up the mess and replace the lid, beginning to feel ridiculous. I move down the side of the house, my sandals clapping against the concrete walkway. On the porch steps, I stop and turn, staring at the lawn already starting to reflect in the evening's humidity.

I shut the front door behind me, and walk to the living room. She has changed positions since I went outside, now lying on her back, her feet propped up on the arm of the sofa. One arm is hanging over the side, less than an inch away from grazing the floor. I turn off the television and sit down on the hardwood floor against the couch, leaning my head back to rest on her hip.

"Erin?"

She doesn't answer.

"The gum in the cupboard isn't mine. It's Amanda's. I hate spearmint."

I don't feel as relieved as I thought I would.

I stare at the white-washed wall and let my eyes wander to the sheetrock ceiling where I can see the uneven paint job clearly in the light from the lamp on the coffee table. Just as I decide to repaint the ceiling the next day, I feel her hand come to rest on my shoulder. I turn my head and she's fast asleep, one of her arms holding onto the throw pillow. I reach up to my shoulder and take hold of her hand. With my other hand, I stretch and click off the table lamp.

I sit like that, my fingers crossed with hers in the dark, until the morning comes.