

## Gumballs

Ameen's store wasn't large, but it had everything: *labneh*, *akkawi* cheese, *zaatar*, *burghul*, *halawa*, various types of Levantine olive oil and several hummus alternatives for those who didn't like "what the Americans have come up with now." His store was the only one of its kind for miles, so there was usually a long wait at the cashier. At some point during this wait, some customers would inevitably cave into their temptations, and hunt for quarters that could be used at the gumball machine.

The machine was a beautiful thing, with a clear sphere, brightly filled, set atop a blue cylinder containing the coin mechanism. But the larger part of the cylinder was clear, through which the colorful gumballs could be seen rolling down a blue spiral ramp to arrive at a shiny silver chute.

The machine didn't belong to Ameen. A few weeks ago, a 16-year-old boy had come in and offered Ameen 5% of the profits in exchange for letting the machine stand in the store. He didn't have to do anything else, so Ameen agreed, privately thinking that his customers wouldn't let their children near that "sugary American nonsense." But his wife Mouna disagreed. She understood the power of whining children better than he did, and sure enough, the machine was half empty by the time Matt came around again.

He arrived as Mouna was closing shop, which she did every day. It was agreed that Ameen would open and Mouna would close, since Ameen got evening headaches and Mouna didn't like waking up to morning alarms. Besides, she liked the quietness of the shop in the evenings. Opening made the day feel so much longer than she wanted it to be.

Matt unlocked the top of the gumball machine and tilted it towards her. "Want one?"

She shook her head. He ripped open a new bag of them and held it out to her. "How about these? They're fresh."

"Both ways they rot your teeth," she responded.

"You sound like my mom." He laughed and popped a gumball into his mouth before closing the top of the dome.

"I'm also a dentist. I was," she corrected.

"How come you aren't one now?"

"I'm not licensed to practice in the US."

“That’s too bad,” he said, holding out her share of the extracted quarters. She was surprised by the warmth in his voice. Mouna rarely asked for sympathy, but it amazed her how often people said things without any feeling.

She didn’t know what to say so she didn’t say anything, and he walked out with the coins jingling in his loose basketball shorts. She followed him to lock up and she was overcome with an urge to be somewhere else, so she went outside and sat on the curb staring through the empty parking lot until Ameen gently tapped her shoulder and they went upstairs.

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Mouna and Ameen had moved to the United States in September. By December they had opened Ameen’s and the store was doing well enough for them to allow themselves to feel settled in. Their new lives were lonely, but they were safe, which was the best they could ask for after the unrest and grief of the last few years.

They lived in the same building as the store, a floor above, which made for an easy commute. Mouna sometimes woke up with the eerie feeling that there were strangers in her house, but she was never able to forget that their household was emptier than it had ever been.

On the days she woke up too early, she would escape downstairs and watch Ameen as he cheerfully rang up the customers, wondering how two people going through the same thing can go through it so separately.

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Matt’s next visit was on a hot day at the end of May. Mouna could tell that schools had begun to close for the summer; children were popping up with their parents in the daytime. The last customers trickled out like slow sweat, and she leaned against the back wall with her eyes closed until jolted out of her reverie by the sound of Matt tinkering with the gumball machine.

“Why did you start doing this?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “I had some extra cash and figured I’d make a little investment. You know, for college.”

“How can this be enough for college?”

“One machine’s probably not, but maybe I’ll save enough to get a few more around town. And I have a summer job lined up.”

He looked up and saw her smiling. “What?” he asked.

She shook her head. "It's nothing."

He shut door of the coin bank and stretched up. "Well," he joked, "if you get your dentist's license I totally want a share for bringing you so many new patients."

Mouna started laughing. "Of course."

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Matt called and said he was going away the last two weeks of June, and asked if the machine was depleted enough for an early maintenance visit. Mouna told him to come. Later, when she saw the gumballs still crowding the fishbowl, she raided the cash register for quarters and cranked them into the coin slot, watching them spiral down into a plastic bag she had taped at the mouth of the chute.

She would do this all through the summer, apologizing to customers for giving them such small change and, after hours, feeding the quarters to the gumball machine in a ritual Ameen watched on the security cameras, though he never said anything.

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By July they had finally accepted the futility of fans and decided to install an air conditioner. Ameen was determined to do it himself, so Mouna held the ladder steady from below. He started teasing her about her low tolerance for the cold, and to his surprise she responded, with a sudden but gentle shake of the ladder. When Matt arrived they were laughing, at themselves, at each other, and because it felt so fresh.

Matt accepted their offer of cake and ice cream, so they all went upstairs and sat around the kitchen table together.

"How did you decide to name the store after Ameen?" Matt asked them.

Mouna looked into Ameen's eyes. "We never really talked about it," she said. Ameen met her gaze for a moment, then looked away.

"We had to make a decision in a hurry," he told Matt. "Also, my name means 'trustworthy person' in Arabic, so we thought it would bring us more customers," he said with a wink.

"What does your name mean, Mouna?" Matt asked her.

"Wishes," she said. "The plural."

Matt laughed. "That's a pretty great name, honestly."

“I’ll save it for my dentistry practice,” she smiled.

“What would my name mean, if you say it in Arabic?”

Ameen thought about it. “Well, there isn’t an exact translation,” he began, then Mouna looked up. “The verb die,” she said. “Past tense.”

“Yikes,” said Matt, then fell silent. They finished the rest of the ice cream and cake without speaking until Ameen offered Matt some tea, but he said he had to get going.

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One night in late August, Mouna went to bed later than usual and was woken up almost immediately by a loud crash downstairs, followed by what sounded like rattling.

“Ameen, wake up!”

He threw off his bedcovers with a sudden jerk of his arm and asked her what was the matter.

“I heard something,” she said. “Downstairs.”

They huddled together and listened. “I don’t hear anything, love,” Ameen said, getting under the covers again. “Go back to sleep.”

Mouna didn’t move.

“You could have imagined it,” said Ameen softly, stroking her back.

She could have. Her imagination didn’t have to stretch far to find tragedy, after all. She resented Ameen; he should have been the same, rather than always being able to sleep as though his namesake hadn’t been taken from them.

When she woke up the next morning, it was past the store’s opening time, but she could distinctly hear Ameen’s voice in the next room. He was talking on the phone. He was talking about a break-in.

Whoever it was must have picked the lock, since the door looked intact. The cash register, of course, had been cleaned out. It would have been a completely silent break-in except for the gumball machine violently toppled, its gumballs scattered among shards of glass that just yesterday held a half-full globe. That was probably what woke her up.

“The police are on their way,” said Ameen. “I’ll call Matt.”

Mouna bent down and picked up the broken body of the machine and placed it upright where it used to stand, now offering them nothing.

Matt arrived before the police did. Sweeping some of the glass away with his sneakered foot, he kneeled to examine what was left of the gumball machine.

“Can you fix it?” asked Mouna.

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I guess it depends on the cost of the replacement parts. I might have to take it somewhere.”

“Take it with you,” said Ameen. “We’ll clean up.”

“Don’t they need it for fingerprints or something?” asked Matt.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Mouna.

“Anyway, we already touched it,” said Ameen.

They stood in a strange new silence. Mouna wanted to say she was sorry, but there was too much to be sorry about, and all of it either too trivial or too heavy to make sense. That’s the thing about loss, she thought. In all its manifestations, it never leaves anything to share.

She went upstairs and stood by the window, watching as Matt heaved the machine into the back of his car. The police came and left, and then it was just her and Ameen again; two people who never learned to grieve together. How horrible to realize she was the one doing it wrong, alone, misplacing her affection like a fool.

She never wanted to tell Ameen any of this, but then he came upstairs and opened his bedside drawer, and he collapsed into sobs as several gumballs rolled into view.