

Faith, Hope and Fiction

Shiny Pennies

by Kelli Christiansen

She felt a little bad about not picking it up. Stepping over it, keeping an eye on it as her foot landed right on it. A little twinge of—what? Regret? Guilt? Nostalgia?

How many pennies was that? How many had she refused to pick up, eschewing the ritual of superstition? Forsaking luck. How many days full of good luck had she missed?

Find a penny, pick it up ...

It had been two years, three months, and six days since she had decided to make a conscious effort to forego superstition. To forget about luck. To break up with stars and wishbones and pennies. Hanging on felt like too many broken promises. Like fate or superstition or karma had cheated her, lied to her. Teased her with the prospect of luck or fortune.

How many of her wishes had gone unfulfilled over the years? A new job for her dad. A speedy recovery for her mother-in-law. A wish that this time, this gal would be right for her brother, and that it would last.

Oh, sure, she made wishes for herself, too. That she'd catch the early train. That she'd ace an exam. That she'd impress during a job interview. But those were within her control. She knew luck had little to do with wishes like that.

... and all the day, you'll have good luck!

It was the big ones that really mattered. Those big wishes that stars and wishbones and pennies always failed. How many pennies had she picked up over the years? Countless. How many pennies had she tossed into fountains and wells? Too many. How many of those wishes had come true? Zero.

If wishes worked, she'd have a family. A brood of her own. At least one pair of little feet tromping through the house. But never had that wish come true. The miscarriage was the last straw.

And, so, she had decided that it just wasn't worth the effort—or the empty promises—to stoop over, pick up the shiny copper penny off the filthy asphalt, and stick it in her pocket, nestled among fuzz and lint and an extra dog-poop bag.

Find a penny, pick it up, and all the day you'll have good luck!

The cloying rhyme gnawed at her. Taunted her. As though to say “If you don't pick it up, you'll never know. You certainly won't have any luck if you don't pick up that penny. Pick it up. Do it!”

She hesitated, lurching in the crosswalk. A stumble so slight no one looking at her would have noticed. But she felt it. That pause. That doubt.

She took another half step before giving in, the glint of that shiny penny too alluring to pass up. This time. This time, yes, she'd pick it up.

Daria stooped over and picked the shiny penny off the grimy street, the ridged detail of Lincoln's face pressing against her forefinger and thumb as she palmed it. The shiny copper in the bright afternoon sun made her squint, forced her to blink. She was sure it was brand new, but she checked the microscopic date anyway: 1968.

She blinked again. “What?” she whispered, to herself. “That's impossible.”

A car beeped at her, urging her to finish crossing the street. Daria scurried the ten feet to the curb, rubbing her eyes with one hand while turning the coin over in the other.

When she looked up, everything seemed at once different and the same. The intersection was the same: pharmacy on one corner, shoe store on another. Trees lined the sidewalks. Container gardens propped in front of shops stood filled with begonias and marigolds and impatiens and geraniums. The streets teemed with old cars.

At first Daria thought there must be an antique car show in the village, one of those summer events downtown business associations concoct to draw shoppers and tourists. But every car she saw was vintage. Old Chevy Camaros and Ford Mustangs, Pontiac Grand Prix and Cadillac de Villes. The streets and parking spaces were crazy with enormous fins and bright colors and rumbling muscle car engines.

She watched as a young mother tried to parallel park an enormous four-door Ford Galaxie, the turquoise sedan glinting in the afternoon sun. As the woman climbed out of the car, Daria couldn't help but stare at her bottle-blond hair, shoulder-length, puffed up full and high, pulled off her forehead in a wide headband. She stared at her short, color-blocked mini-dress, her chunky, strappy brown sandals, and her boxy, embossed brown leather handbag.

It wasn't until Daria heard the car door clunk closed that she finally averted her eyes. She rubbed the penny, still in her hand. Bright, shiny, and new. 1968? It didn't make any sense.

She crossed Main Street and headed toward the pharmacy. If everything was normal—though it clearly wasn't—the drug store would have the day's newspapers stacked high on wire racks. Daria wanted to take a look at them. To make sure she hadn't lost her mind. To make sure that she was still where she thought she was. To make sure that she was still *when* she thought she was.

A bell jingled as she pushed open the door. Cold, air-conditioned air slammed her in the face. Goosebumps erupted on her skin. She rubbed her arms as she walked just the few steps toward the newspaper racks. She looked at the front pages of all of them. *Chicago Tribune*. *Chicago Sun-Times*. *The New York Times*. All of them had the same date: June 21, 1968. The first day of summer. Forty-five summers ago. The papers were talking about Chicago-area servicemen killed in Vietnam, about an Illinois Bell employee charged with battery, about the prospect of Nixon being the GOP nominee for president.

Daria shook her head, rubbed her eyes again. “Impossible,” she whispered.

Stunned, she turned to leave. The little bell on the door jingled again as she exited. The bright summer sun brought spots to her eyes, but the warmth of the day failed to erase the goosebumps that dotted her arms and legs. She stood on the sidewalk outside the pharmacy, rubbing her arms, wondering. Lost in thought, she barely noticed the persistent ringing coming from behind her.

As it finally dawned on her that the ringing was the cell phone in her back pocket, she looked more closely around her. Everything was familiar. Everything was the same as ever. Everything was *now*.

She stared at the phone in confusion. “Mom?” she asked, disbelieving the caller ID.

“Hello, honey,” her mother sang into the phone. “How are you, dear? What are you up to today?”

Daria couldn’t process either question, her mind a blur of confusion and wonder. “Mom,” she prompted, “does June 21st mean anything to you?”

“Isn’t that today’s date, dear?”

“I guess so. Yeah,” Daria admitted. “But I mean, does this date mean anything? Is it an anniversary or something?”

“Hmmm,” her mother mumbled. “Nothing springs to mind.”

“Nothing? What about something from some other year? Like, say, 1968?”

“June 21st, 1968?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the day you came home from the hospital.”

“When I was a baby?”

“That’s right. You were so little, you were down at the premie center in Peoria. They didn’t have all the fancy hospitals they do now, so they sent you down there for a couple weeks until you were big and strong enough to come home. We waited and wished for you to come home, and that’s when you did. June 21st.”

Daria had heard her parents tell the story of her homecoming countless times, but never with a date attached—at least not one she remembered.

“It was a Saturday,” her mother continued. “So your father and I and your grandparents all piled into the station wagon and drove down there to pick you up. It was a dream come true to finally have you home with us.”

Daria and her mother chatted for a few more minutes before hanging up, Daria still in a haze of incredulity. She walked home, turning over the penny in her hand, again and again. Every once in a while, she’d look at it, look around her, and look back at it. Stared at it. Tried to divine its magic. But it seemed to have shared all it was going to.

After ignoring pennies for years, Daria spent the next few days looking everywhere for them. Streets, sidewalks, parking lots—she looked everywhere but found nothing. She chastised herself for breaking her own promise, for kidding herself about the notion of pennies and luck and wishful thinking.

But then it happened again. That Thursday, standing on the train platform, sipping a venti iced decaf Americano full of Splenda and half-and-half, she saw it. Not nine inches from her right foot. Glinting in the sun. A shiny penny.

She looked around, trying to see if someone had just dropped it, or if someone else was about to pick it up. But everyone else was preoccupied, entranced by their smartphones, reading newspapers, staring at Kindles. No one was watching her. No one was eyeing the penny.

Daria shifted her tote bag. Switched her beverage, dripping with condensation, from her right hand to her left. Stooped over and picked up the penny.

She didn't need any insight from her mom to know where she had landed. One look and memory became present. She remembered it like it was yesterday.

But it was more than a memory. It was happening now. Again. It was 1985. The platform was crowded, hoards of suburbanites waiting for the train that would take them into the city for the Taste of Chicago. Parents holding on to young kids, many clutching Cabbage Patch dolls. Groups of teens, girls dressed like Madonna with lace and leather and multiple strands of cheap necklaces, guys with sky-high Flock-of-Seagulls haircuts. Daria was there—then—with her boyfriend, Grady.

As she saw them, Daria felt as though she was at once reliving that experience—as fresh as it were yesterday—and watching as it happened. She was straddling both times, experiencing then and now. She laughed at her preppy outfit—the white Bermuda shorts, the pink and green polo, the whale-patterned canvas belt, all in complete contrast to the pop-star wannabes on the other end of the train platform. She marveled at Grady's hair—still thick and wavy then—and his John Lennon sunglasses.

She saw them teasing each other, joshing around during those heady first days of their relationship. They had only been dating for a few weeks in the summer of 1985 when they

decided to trek into the city for the Taste. Like most teens, they were goofy and gawky and clumsy, stumbling through the first meaningful romance for either of them. Grady tickled Daria. She twisted away, laughing.

“You love it!” he laughed, reaching for her ribs. “Tell me you love it.”

“All right! All right!” she squealed. “I love it!”

“Tell me you love me.”

“I love you,” she said, surprised at her own words.

“I love you, too,” he said, surprising her even more.

The chiming warning bells of the railroad alerted them to the eastbound train heading into the station. Daria turned her head to watch, the acrid smell of burning metal wafting into her face as the passenger train braked and came to a stop, the doors opening in front of her.

“All aboard!”

Daria remained fixed on the platform, watching as passengers queued to ascend the few stairs into the vestibules that split the train cars in half, pushing and shoving as though the train might leave without them, as though another wasn't coming in twenty minutes.

“All aboard!” the train conductor repeated his call. “Miss? You comin'?”

Her reverie broken at last, Daria realized that she was back in the present, the glimpse into the summer of 1985 vanished, popped like a soap bubble floating on air. But the image lingered with her, comforting her as she remembered those early days with Grady, those intoxicating weeks before they left for college at the end of the summer, going their separate ways.

She tucked the shiny penny from 1985 into her wallet, right next to the shiny penny from 1968. She looked around at her fellow passengers, wondering if anyone else had experienced

anything odd. If anyone had, no one was telling. Everyone was just doing their regular morning thing. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Nothing except for the fact that she was—what? Time traveling? Impossible. But those moments—those scenes—they felt so real. As though she were really there. Then. And now. Which, of course, was impossible. Ridiculous. She had no idea what was going on or what it all meant. There was no way she could even tell anyone without everyone thinking she had gone completely crazy.

But she didn't feel crazy. This bizarre experience, these impossible visions—whatever they were—lifted her spirits. She couldn't suppress the grin that spread across her face or deny the calm contentment she hadn't felt in years. These visions—maybe they were just memories—comforted her.

That cozy feeling stuck with her as she alighted from the train at the final stop in downtown Chicago and followed the crush of people as she trudged her way way down Madison Street to Wacker Drive and into her office. Lost in thought, she made her way to her cubicle.

“Hey, Dreamy.” Her friend Sophie's wide smile revealed the whitest teeth Daria had ever seen. “You look like you're lost. Or like you've seen a ghost or something.”

Daria couldn't stifle the little nervous cough that erupted. “No, no,” she stammered. “No ghosts. Nothing that exciting.”

“Nothing like that, huh? Then what? Something's put that goofy look on your face.”

“Do I look goofy?”

“Goofy. Dreamy. Something.”

Daria weighed whether to tell Sophie about the shiny old pennies and the visions. Sophie did have a kooky side, a hippie edge to her, which she revealed in long, messy hair streaked with gray, chunky necklaces, beaded bracelets, and a lot of colorful Bohemian skirts. She was big into

astrology—at one point she’d even done up a birth chart for Daria—and she studied the world’s religions, looking for meaning anywhere and everywhere. If Daria could share with anyone, Sophie would be it.

“It’s nothing, really,” she said. “I found these two pennies, that’s all. They look brand new, but they’re both really old.”

“Let’s see ’em,” Sophie said, thrusting out her hand, palm up.

Daria dug the pennies out of her wallet. “They just got me thinking. That’s all.”

“Two cents worth,” Sophie joked.

Daria watched her friend as she examined the pennies, the copper glistening in the fluorescent overhead lighting of their office.

“They look brand new,” Sophie marveled. “That’s so weird.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Like they were minted yesterday.”

“I know.”

Sophie turned them over in her hand again and again. Then, handing them back to Daria, she said, “They’re beautiful. I’d hang on to those if I were you. They must be extra lucky.”

Daria couldn’t stifle the scoff. “Lucky pennies,” she snorted. But she couldn’t help but wonder, even as she shook her head.

“You never know,” Sophie said. “At any rate, you were lucky to find them. So pretty.”

“They are pretty,” Daria agreed.

“1968. 1985. I wonder what I was up to then. Makes me think.”

“Me, too.”

“Well, you should do something with them. Drill some holes into them and make them earrings or something. Whatever you do, don’t get rid of them. They’re so—I don’t know. Special.”

Daria couldn’t deny that. They were special. Sophie didn’t know the half of it, although Daria suspected she wouldn’t be too surprised if she had told her everything about them.

In fact, when it was Sophie who picked up the shiny penny they both spotted at the same time on their way to lunch later that day, Daria held her breath, wondering what would happen.

Sophie handed the penny to Daria and then linked arms with her, guiding her across the street.

“What year?” she asked.

“2002,” Daria whispered, penny in hand.

And then they were there. Together. Then and now. Daria and Sophie were at Rivers, a restaurant they visited frequently. They were standing in front of the building—now—and they both could see it as it was then. Daria and Grady were there. Sophie, too. And all their friends. Daria in her wedding gown, Grady in a tux. It was their wedding reception.

Daria could see them laughing, dancing, chatting with family and friends, full of love and hope. Everyone so happy. She smiled at the sound of someone tapping a glass with a fork, urging the newly married couple to kiss, yet again.

The chiming kept on, even though the kiss had ended. The incessant noise brought Daria back to the present, where she realized it was the sound-enabled walk sign at the intersection alerting pedestrians to the diminishing time before the traffic lights changed and the “walk” sign switched to “don’t walk.”

Sophie tugged at Daria, leading her across the intersection. Once across Monroe, she pulled them to a stop. They stared at each other, Daria puzzled, Sophie smiling.

“That *is* a lucky penny!” Sophie exclaimed, her eyes wide.

Daria nodded slowly, still lost in time.

“You saw that, right?”

Daria nodded again.

“Is it you?” Sophie asked. “Or the penny?”

“I think it’s the penny,” Daria said. “I’m pretty sure it’s the penny.”

“Either way,” Sophie said, “what a lucky woman you are!”

“You’re the one who picked it up!” Daria protested.

“But it was meant for you,” Sophie said. “I may have picked it up, but I gave it to you.

That penny was always yours. What a gift!”

“A gift?” Daria asked. “Don’t you just think it’s strange? I mean, it’s impossible. Right?”

“Who am I to say what’s possible and what’s not?” Sophie asked with a shrug. “All I know is that whatever we just saw was pretty damn cool. Something special. Precious, even. Yeah, it’s a gift.”

“But it’s so weird.”

“Who cares?” Sophie countered. “So what if it’s weird? Sometimes we get stuff—something is given to us—and we just have to be thankful for it. Without asking why or how. I think you’re pretty lucky.”

Daria stared at the shiny copper penny in her hand. 2002. The year she married Grady. They didn’t know then that they would never have children, but, truth be told, they hadn’t really thought much about it at the time. They were so focused on each other and building their life together—the two of them—that they never really thought beyond making a home for one another. All they needed was each other.

The memory lingered for the rest of the day. Daria spent much of the afternoon in her cubicle distracted by the three shiny pennies, each looking brand new despite the decades-old dates on them. She thought about her wedding day, about the first day—so long ago—when she realized she loved Grady. She thought about how lucky she was to even be alive, coming home after weeks in the hospital after being born so early and so very tiny.

Daria fiddled with the pennies the whole way home, jostling them in her pocket as she walked from office to train, from train to her house, a tiny brick bungalow she shared with Grady and their dog. The years streamed through her mind as though on video. 1968, 1985, 2002—and all the years between and since. Highlights popped into her brain as though she were fast-forwarding a movie. The day she won her first track-and-field medal. The day she learned she would be the valedictorian of the graduating class of her college. The first day of her first job.

So lost in thought was she that she nearly missed the coin on the welcome mat on the stoop. If she hadn't dropped her house keys while trying to unlock the front door, she would have stepped right over it.

But there it was, waiting for her. She shook her head with a laugh and picked it up, wondering what memory would flash before her eyes.

She recognized the place. That was easy enough. It was the living room of her house. The furniture was different, though, and the walls were a different color. But that fireplace, those windows—no doubt it was her living room. The room was packed with people young and old. Some looked familiar, some she couldn't place at all. So many of them had silver hair. It was as though she was looking at a party at an assisted living center. Even so, everyone was laughing and chattering. The clatter of cups and glasses and forks and plates and talk and laughter filled the air.

Above the fireplace was a huge banner sporting bright colors and bold letters: “Congratulations!” Below it, hand-written on poster board, was another sign: “You’ve finally retired!” Pictures of Paris littered the walls. Maps of the city’s arrondissements were speckled with pushpins, some blue, some green, one red. A huge arrow pointed to a spot in the Latin Quarter. Someone had written “Chez Daria et Grady” near the spot.

Daria realized with a start that she was looking into the future. Her future. That those old people were her and Grady and their friends and family. That it was she and Grady who were retiring. They were the ones moving to Paris. Their home was filled with friends and family who were celebrating them and the terrific lives they had led—and the future in Paris that awaited them. It didn’t matter that there weren’t any children around. They had led a fabulous life together. Daria realized that she was surrounded with love, surrounded by friends who wished only the best for her.

Amidst all the chatter and clatter, Daria could hear a phone ringing, the persistent bell begging for someone to pick up. She thought maybe a would-be party-goer had gotten lost, calling for directions. Or perhaps someone was calling to offer their congratulations.

But the phone kept ringing. Daria at last realized it was her landline. She was back in the present. She fumbled for her keys, dropping the penny. When she stooped over to pick it up, the microscopic date caught her eye: 2047.

When she finally reached the phone, Grady was on the line. “Hey,” he said, “I thought I’d missed you.”

“No, no,” Daria said, fingering the penny. “I’m here.”

“What’s up?”

“Oh,” she said, “I couldn’t get to my keys. There was a penny on the mat. I picked it up, but then I dropped my keys.”

“Did you make a wish?”

“I did,” Daria said. “I did make a wish.”

“What’d you wish for?”

“I can’t tell you,” she joked. “Or it won’t come true.”

“Something good?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding, thinking about the future that awaited them both. “Something to look forward to.”

“Sounds like a good wish,” Grady said. “I hope it comes true.”

“Oh,” Daria said, stifling a laugh. “I think it will.”

Kelli Christiansen is an editor and writer whose work has appeared in such media as *Book Business Magazine*, *Chicago Book Review*, *Chicago Life*, *Chicago Literati*, and *San Francisco Book Review*.

Copyright Kelli Christiansen 2013