

LUCKY PENNY

“Woot, woooooot!”

Sadie poked her head around the gray, carpeted wall of the cubicle and whispered loudly so everyone could hear, “It’s Friday. It’s Payday. It’s your birthday. It’s Margarita Time. I’m buying.” She displayed a grotesquely perfect Cheshire grin and pumped her eyebrows up and down.

Penny picked up the phone. “Yes, Mr. Jones, we would love to quote you on your house and car. Oh no, Mr. Jones, I don’t mind working late on a Friday--I have no plans this evening.”

“Good girl. I’ll get my purse.” Sadie jumped up and ran to the coat rack.

Penny resisted any enthusiasm for payday drinks with Sadie. Especially on someone’s

birthday, particularly her own. Thankfully the easy summer evening drew the rest of the office out early, sparing Penny the obligation of a long evening at Ray's. She liked her colleagues, but she had a life beyond the office.

And while she liked margaritas well enough—blended, like a slushy, no salt—and even though he knew to hold back on the tequila for her, Ray's drinks were way too big.

But mostly, Sadie drank too much.

Sadie could be counted on to carry the conversation, usually by bragging about her two kids and their athletic exploits. Or, about her husband, Jerry (last year's Ruckmeyer Chevrolet Top Performer.) And, if a sad song played on the juke box, an unemployed cowboy would undoubtedly swagger up to the table and ask her to dance—Sadie, not Penny.

Penny never got asked to dance.

Sadie leaned her elbows on the bar, her chin in her hands, white blouse unbuttoned past professional, "Hi Ray, miss me?"

Without looking up Ray called back from the cutting board, "Happy payday, Ladies. Two Margaritas?"

"You better believe it, Baby." She lingered on the bar, admiring Ray as he cut limes. He looked up with his soft eyes, "I'll bring them out to you."

"I'll be waiting." She flashed her smile and spun around to join Penny in the booth by the dance floor.

It was early. The only people in the place were Ray and a man in his early twenties sitting at the bar. The TV played the evening news. A juke box from the early 1950's stood against the wall next to the small parquet dance floor. Ray's father bought the machine new when he opened

the bar and never changed the records. In the 1970's, the story goes, he bought a case of red light bulbs for "that special ambiance."

Ray carried his father's spirit forward by spray painting cheap Sylvania's.

"The old man would approve," he always insisted.

The only comfort Penny drew from the atmosphere at Ray's was that the two booths were very small, barely deep enough for two people on each side. In the summer, without her down parka and scarf, Penny felt the bench too large. Too exposed.

"How was your week?"

Penny dug through her floppy purse. "Fine. And yours?"

"Oh fine, I guess..." Sadie launched into a story about her son selling raffle tickets for the middle school band fundraiser. She bought 20 tickets and won the drawing for the car detailing... Blah, blah, blah.

Penny had never had her car detailed. She kept digging.

"Hey Mary Poppins, what are you looking for in that tote? A floor lamp?"

"Um..." Penny stopped digging. "No. Nothing." If Sadie knew, she would buy one too—that would ruin everything.

Ray approached the booth with the drinks.

"Penny. Sadie."

"Ooo, yay! Margi's here. Let's get this party started! Thank you Ray..." She dragged out the last part, batting her eyelashes and smiling at the slim, square-jawed bartender.

She held the back of her hand next to her mouth and whispered, "It's Penny's birthday."

"Oh. Happy birthday Penny. This round is compliments of the gentleman at the bar. The

next one's on me." He backed away from the table and smiled at Penny with a nod.

"Oh, we will." Sadie eyed Ray's butt as he walked away. "I luuuv Wranglers..."

Penny leaned over and whispered, "You are a married woman! You shouldn't be flirting with him like that."

"No? Then how should I flirt with him?" She cocked her head to one side and pursed her lips. "And you should give up buying lottery tickets. You never win."

Penny pulled her bag to her hip. "You're impossible." She didn't smile when she said this. She meant it. Even in high school Sadie had driven her crazy by flirting with boys in front of her. Or, with her prom date.

The cowboy leaning against the bar watched them. He winked at Sadie when she glanced over. She rolled her eyes and took a long drag on her straw.

Penny's thoughts drifted back to her missing lottery ticket as Sadie launched into another story, this one about Jerry getting promoted to manager at the truck dealership.

Maybe she had looked at it one too many times at work and left it on her desk. The jackpot was over \$200,000,000—a number that would fix anyone's life. Maybe today was the day.

Walking to work in the morning she had spotted a penny by the front door to the insurance agency. Her father always said to leave the tails-up pennies on the ground. Only heads-up brought good luck. And, if it had your birth year it was the best. Nothing could stop you if you had that.

But, it had been tails-up. She had left it. Still, maybe this time...

Penny was halfway through her first drink when Sadie started in on her third. Hank

Williams warbled “Hey Good Lookin” out of the vintage jukebox. The cowboy from the bar, tall, lean and scruffy in his work clothes, sauntered over, scuffing his weathered boots on the wood floor. He set his fists on the table and squinted at Sadie.

“You need to dance.” His voice was deep and smooth and full of confidence that she would not say no. His Adam’s apple bounced when he talked. Sadie liked a man with stubble and weathered skin. And confidence.

Penny was attracted to the softer side of masculinity: clean-shaven, clean clothes, a steady job. Polite. Like Jerry.

Penny looked down at her drink.

The cowboy bobbed an eyebrow at Sadie. She let the words sift out of the air as she fiddled with her straw.

“Do I?”

Penny held the base of the margarita stemware firmly against the table. She could smell his musk from a day of labor. Not the stench of hard labor, but the prominence of his unique odor, activated by light perspiration. It was the kind of pheromone cloud Sadie could not resist.

The cowboy stood at the end of the booth, blocking Penny’s way out. She picked up her glass with both hands and sucked up the tequila slush. If she finished the drink quickly, she hoped, she could cut out early.

“It’s my friend who needs to dance.” Sadie’s devilish face peered at her through the reddish bar light. “It’s her birthday today.”

Penny froze, the margarita filled straw pursed in her lips. The rapid intake of frigid slushy slammed her head with brain freeze.

The cowboy, turned his head to Penny, and stood up straight. He held out one hand to her, the other behind his back. A respectful mock-formality.

“Happy birthday. May I have this dance?” He grinned, holding out his hand. “Just a quick one, ma’am. The song’s half over.”

Sadie kicked Penny’s shin, breaking her frozen pose.

“Ow!” The brain freeze eased off. She nodded at the cowboy.

Ma’am? She wasn’t that old--30. Older than this guy, but not old enough for “Ma’am”.

“Come on. Let’s spin.” He winked.

Penny rose to her feet, her anxious heart thumping. She took his hand. He walked backward, leading her onto the parquet.

They stood at arm’s length, like in junior high, stiff and reluctant. Penny might have been taller if she had better posture. The high school basketball coach had wanted her for the team, but she hated sports. She never felt at home in her body—conscious of her height she bore a permanent slouch.

She truly hated dancing.

Arms up, elbows raised, back straight, just like middle school gym class. The cowboy pressed forward with the music. She stumbled backward. His laborer’s arms held her up without breaking his form. He held his gaze over her right shoulder; his formality a prophylactic against intimacy.

Penny kept her eyes down, watching her feet. Her head felt fuzzy from the margarita. One, two. One, two. Slide, trip!

As Hank wound up the song with his guitar progression and the flirtatious line, “... How’s

about cookin' something up with meeee..." Penny felt the cowboy's hold loosen. Taking the queue, she loosened her grip on his hand and shoulder. He swung his arm up, twisting Penny, who was trying to let go and back away. Her bicep hit her cheek and she stumbled. He held her hand, catching her from falling.

"Oh! Excuse me," he said, as the music faded. "I was trying to spin you. Are you okay?"

"Um, yeah. Sorry. I didn't..." She pulled her hand back and scuttled back to the booth.

The cowboy stayed on the dance floor, his hands behind his back, feet together. He raised his eyebrow at Sadie and held out his hand as the next Hank Williams song started, "Honky Tonk Blues".

Sadie popped up like a jack in the box. She took a long drag on her drink and sashayed to the dance floor, her hand reaching out to his.

The couple stood in the formal dancing posture, arms and elbows raised, counting the beats of the song. At the next down-beat they swept into motion, fixing their eyes on each other and whipping around the floor like seasoned partners.

As the end of the song approached the spins came faster twirling her skirt higher and higher. Sweat beaded on their foreheads. On the last chord the cowboy dipped Sadie, prompting a squeal. He pulled her up and held her with both arms. She placed both of her arms on his neck. A thank you hug that, in Penny's opinion, lasted too long.

The couple stayed on the floor, laughing and panting, waiting for the next song. "Your Cheatin Heart" started up and the couple settled into a rocking motion similar to a middle school slow-dance. Their arms and elbows hung low, their hips nearly touched—the cowboy's stiff formality replaced by a sensuous magnetism. Sadie stood on her toes and said something in his

ear. The cowboy laughed.

He dropped his hands to her hips.

Jerry was probably still at work, waiting for the after-work truck shoppers. Penny wondered what he knew of Sadie's dancing. He had always hated dancing, even at the prom. She could never say anything to him—even in revenge.

Ray came to the table with a glass of ice water.

“Here you go, Penny. How's your birthday going?”

“Fine. Thanks.”

“Nice moves out there. Maybe next time I'll beat him to the punch...”

“No! I mean, no. Please, I hate dancing. I'm awful at it. I'm all thumbs... or whatever you say.”

“You mean you have two left feet?” Ray smiled.

Penny sucked down the last of her slushy. “Here you go.” She handed him the empty glass without looking up.

“So, hey. Maybe I'll see you later. I have to drop off your dad's edge trimmer I borrowed last week.”

“Sure.” Penny slouched in the booth and gave Ray a meek smile. She raised her hand in a small wave as he backed away from the table.

Penny stared at the evening news over the bar. The lottery drawing came on. She sat up out of her haze. A man in a suit and tie, holding a long microphone, talked and pushed a button to start the drawing. One by one white ping-pong balls shot up a clear plastic vacuum tube. The man placed them in a tray on the table next to the lottery machine. She didn't need her ticket;

she had memorized the numbers between phone calls at work.

The first number landed: 09. That was one of her numbers. Her heart skipped. Next: 32. Holy crap! She hadn't ever hit three numbers, this could it... 41. Penny's heart sank. Not even three lousy little numbers. Never! Why not a little \$2 refund? Why can't she ever, ever win anything? Not a damned thing! Not a cake at the bake sale, not a ball cap at the rotary fundraiser. Not even a heads-up penny. Nothing! Ever!

The tears welled up and rolled down her cheeks.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Sadie crashed into the booth, her skin glistening in the red light.

Penny wiped her tears. Sadie glanced at the TV. "Oh God, girl. Give it up. Tell you what," she pointed a finger toward Penny, but not actually at her—it waved about as she spoke. "I'll bring in that coupon I won for Jerry Jr's fundraiser an' give it to you. Then you don't have to keep buying tickets for shit you can' win. It'll be my birthday present to you."

Penny clutched her bag and edged out of the booth.

"Hold on, Girl. Where you goin'?' It's early." Sadie stood in Penny's way.

"I'm going home. I'm tired. It's dinner time. Besides, you have some dancing to do." She nodded at the bar where the cowboy was sucking on a beer bottle, watching them.

"What, him? There's plenty of time for him later. Come on. Let's dance"

"I have to go home. I need to make dinner."

"Bull. Order your dad some pizza. Jeopardy's on 'till 7:00. You can't skip dancin' on your birthday. You have to say g'bye to your 20s." Sadie pulled on Penny's hand.

Penny sighed. She dropped her bag at the edge of the dance floor. She bent her knees to

the beat of the music, swaying her arms at her side. She could feel the cowboy's gaze.

Sadie took both Penny's hands and two-stepped around her, getting closer and closer.

Penny forced a smile. Sadie stepped back and pretended to rope Penny, miming like she was pulling her in. As she pulled on her invisible rope, she stepped up, pressing her body to Penny's.

Penny looked at Sadie's face, "Stop it."

Sadie stared over Penny's shoulder at the cowboy. She started grinding on Penny, hugging her dramatically, eyes on the cowboy. Penny stopped moving altogether.

Sadie grabbed her left butt cheek.

The cowboy laughed.

Penny shoved Sadie.

"What the hell?!" Penny snatched her bag and dashed to the door. She heard Sadie shout, "You know you want me!"

The cowboy laughed.

Penny burst out of the bar clutching her bag to her chest. She jogged down the sidewalk toward the Elk's building, fresh tears running down her cheeks. A blue sedan screeched to a stop as she crossed the street without looking up. The smell of Sadie's breath and the strength of her grip branded her senses.

Jerry's face flashed before her teary eyes.

At the end of the block, on the corner in front of the Elk's lodge, the city had installed a decorative metal bench and bike rack. On evenings after especially long days, Penny sat on the bench on her way home from work. Ornamented with old bicycle cogs and chains, she found the seat surprisingly comfortable. Facing east she could watch the setting sun's light reflect off the

eastern clouds. For a few minutes she could forget about work, about her father's increasing decrepitude, about Jerry's rough kiss at prom over a decade earlier.

About lottery numbers.

She plopped down on the bench and took a few deep breaths. Everybody was out to dinner or already at the movies, leaving the streets mostly empty and quiet. Even the sparse clouds hung lazily in the sky. Penny hugged her bag and stared at the gray sidewalk, sniffing.

Next to the base of the bike rack a brown glint on the pavement caught her eye.

A penny.

She squinted her eyes. Dark and tarnished, she could tell it was heads-up.

She stood up. Looking around, and seeing no one, but feeling embarrassed at stooping for a coin, she picked up the penny.

She closed her eyes and whispered, "Please God. Just this once."

Opening her eyes slowly, she peeked at the coin in her palm.

Crap! 1980. Sadie had been held back a year - it was her's, not Penny's. Her throat clogged. She squeezed the coin in her fist.

To hell with that woman. Who wants to be skinny and beautiful if you can't keep your pants on? Jerry was probably cheating on her, too. What goes around, comes around. Where's the luck in that?

She plopped back onto the bench.

A yellow, rusty, 70s vintage Ford pickup rumbled to a stop at the corner. It idled like a Harley through the hole in its muffler.

Ray hollered through the open window, "Penny. You OK?"

Penny wiped her eyes and nodded. She wished he would just drive off. Leave her alone.

Why was he always bugging her?

“Hop in. I’ll give you a ride.”

She shook her head. “No thanks.”

“Come on. I’m heading back to your place now. I need to return that trimmer.”

She shook her head. She looked at the sky and sniffled.

“I don’t think your dad wants his birthday girl crying on a corner all alone.”

“No, thanks.” Penny stared at the thin clouds.

The door of the truck slammed. Ray trotted around the idling exhaust. He sat on the bench and held out a red bandanna.

“Here. Blow your nose. You’re too pretty to look like you’ve got a summer cold.”

Penny smiled and took the bandanna. She wiped her runny nose.

“Listen, those guys were drunk. Drunk people are jerks. You deserve better than that.”

She looked away.

He stood up, “Come on. I’ll be your chauffeur.”

He held out his right hand, the other behind his back. Feet together, back straight.

Penny smiled. She raised herself up, hauled her tote onto her shoulder and took Ray’s hand. He opened the door to the cab, holding her hand until she was all the way in the truck. He ran around the back of the vehicle, waved at the Jeep that had pulled up behind them, and jumped in behind the wheel.

“Home, Ma’am?” He asked.

“Yes, please.”

Penny watched the trees and houses pass by. The evening's golden light threw a halo around every translucent leaf. Kids played on the swing set in the church playground. A couple walked along the sidewalk, hand-in-hand.

Penny glanced at Ray. He grinned. She rubbed the penny with the tip of her thumb. The houses blurred in her wet eyes.

She wondered if Jerry had sold any trucks.