



Toronto



LUCKY PENNY

May, 1982

THERE'S A CERTAIN WEIGHT, a light heft, that she likes. Penny in the right front jean pocket, she can slip her hand in any time, turn it with her thumb between index and middle finger, never lose contact. It's another perfect spring evening, like yesterday's, like tomorrow's. When Gail called, Sarah did a quick palm flip, heads or tails. Heads. *Yes*. So she's meeting her sister and a pack of buddies down on Queen Street. Leaving her rooming-house room on Palmerston, the tidy single bed, lopsided dresser, books carefully stacked on the floor, to walk south all the way to Queen, absorbing the city, the evening, the day. Taking the smaller streets, back lanes wherever she can find them, the secret side of the city, raccoon-haunted, private. A scramble of graffiti on garage doors, messages only the writers can read. Roses spilling over broken wooden gates, tin garbage cans rusted into lace.

When she gets down to the wide, raw intersection of Spadina and Queen, it feels too broad. The walk signal to cross to the east side is flashing; she's not sure there's time to cross. That heft in her pocket. Another quick palm flip: *yes*. She hustles across all six lanes, a sedan taking a left heading north leaning on his horn at her. A streetcar shimmies west along Queen, one of the old-fashioned, rusty, red-and-cream models. For a moment she's distracted by a clunky station wagon trying to parallel park, angling awkwardly into a small spot. The driver, an older guy, looks irritated and frustrated. She figures he doesn't need an audience and hurries on past. A scraggly American elm sapling is handcuffed to a post as if it's committed some crime. Poor little

elm. The leaves are mostly green, though a few are withered, how often does it get watered? The collar around the trunk is padded to keep it from scarring the bark but the sapling still looks imprisoned, punished –

She hears something, she's not sure of the sequence, an engine or tire squeal and then a thud, a crash, or a crash and then a thud, a dull, flat, hideous sound.

She can't look back. She wants to keep looking at the sad little tree because she knows if she turns around, whatever she sees will stay in her. A leaf sighs, perhaps in the aftershock of whatever it is that has happened behind her.

Someone is screaming and screaming. The strength of that scream allows Sarah to turn around, because no one could call that loudly and be badly hurt.

The big station wagon is straddling the sidewalk. It jumped the curb and someone has been caught between the chrome of the fat rear bumper and the storefront behind her, a shoe store. She can see clothing, a beige cotton sweater entangled somehow with the bumper, and she can see an arm, but somehow she can't resolve the bits she's seeing into the story of what's happened. The driver is leaning forward with his head against the steering wheel. He must have seen what his car did, because his head is resolute against the wheel and she can feel how heavy it is to him.

The woman screaming is not whoever has been caught between the car and the wall. She's a young woman dressed in tight black clothing and her face is whiter than Sarah imagines a face could be and then the woman claps her hand across her mouth to stop the sound and it seems quiet on the sidewalk.

No sound, not a groan, not breath, from the woman caught; Sarah knows now it's a woman, peripheral vision.

A young man pushes his way into the store next door and she hears him say, *Call 911, call 911!* and she sees the clerk reaching for a phone from behind the counter. Sarah can't move, isn't helping, though she's had the sense to step back as others have moved forward. She sees a slim woman about her age in

green pyjamas, no, that's not right, green scrubs, she must be a nurse, or a nurse's aide, giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, something Sarah never learned, thinking that the emergency would be always someplace else, someone else's.

And now there are sirens, not that much time can have passed but she's been adrift in the moment. It's a fire engine, but almost at the same moment she sees an ambulance pulling carefully beside the station wagon and the attendants are quick but careful as well and she knows there's nothing she can do, nothing for her to do. And she's not a witness, she didn't see it. She lets this thought move through her head and then she steps back and back and turns on her heel and walks the half block to the Rivoli, where her sister is waiting for her. The sirens seem to accumulate in her head and she feels herself slip, move into a no-space. But she keeps walking, goes past the sidewalk tables out front and into the dimness of the restaurant. She sees Gail and her friends at a table in the back.

That heft in her pocket. If she'd waited for the next light, if the penny had said *no*, it could've been her. Her emergency.

Gail's deep in some kind of intense talk but she must sense Sarah – she looks up and waves her over. “So what do you think of the Rivoli? I thought we should try something new, we're always at the Queen Mum... I think you've met Caroline, and this is Sharon and Barb.”

“Have a seat,” one of the women, a stocky redhead, says.

Sarah can't sit. She doesn't know what to do with her body.

“Sarah,” the woman says, “you okay?”

She doesn't have any words.

“Sarah?” Gail turns to her, gets up from the table, moves towards her. And that's when Gail pulls her against her thin chest, because something must be wrong for Sarah to look like that. And Sarah feels herself pulled into Gail, feels herself slip back into herself, pulled through that fine surface of glass that separates them into the halves they have to be without one another, and she knows, her forehead against Gail's cheek, that they're back into the whole

they really are, Rorschach inkblots that mean something, anyone can read what they mean. Her sister has her.



The next day the headline in the papers is ‘Freak Accident Kills Pedestrian’ and there’s a picture of the station wagon and police tape but no mention of the woman’s name, just her age, 51, and the age of the driver, 71. The next day Sarah will come back to the sidewalk where it happened because she can’t help herself. Nothing remarkable, the yellow caution tape is gone and the storefront looks unmarred, but there is a man kneeling at the threshold, something reverent in his bearing. He’s fixing the metal doorplate, which must have been injured along with the woman who died.

Laila

My small fist slowly warming the coolness of the iron loop. An oval loop, its stem toothed. The taste of iron when I took it in my mouth, the first thing I knew. I would lean my small head against my mother's chest. My fist holding the key. It opened the door to our house, the old house, the one we lost. My mother's voice low, hoarse, the lullaby slow: *Everyone we love has gone away. When I come to greet the fig tree, no one is there to ask me in. The good nights now are gone. Everyone we love has gone away. But sorrow never lasts forever.* My mother's voice, hoarse and low.



DIRT

“YOU SPEND YOUR WHOLE DAY in the dirt.” Gail’s fiddling restlessly with the short tufts of her hair.

“I like dirt. I *like* dirt.” Dirt is something Sarah understands. It makes her feel real.

Gail has set her hands flat and tense on the rough wooden surface of the table. It’s three days since they met at the Rivoli, since Sarah saw but didn’t see the accident, the woman who died. When Gail pulled her against her thin chest, Sarah felt herself slip back into herself. But now Gail’s separate again, and ticked off. With Sarah, as usual.

“Look, I know how hard you work,” her sister is saying. “But what is going on inside your head? Is it some proto-Marxist manual-labour-is-the-only-real-work shit? Or just plain old Protestant-work-ethic shit? Huh?”

Sarah blinks in the sunlight. She can’t explain. What she likes about her job is that she can clear away the weeds and garbage, and make a space where something can grow. That’s why she likes her job. It’s simple. And clear.

She blinks again. There are no curtains, no blinds on the industrial-sized windows in Gail’s apartment. Gail has just moved into this raw loft space south of Queen, a corner one-bedroom, 14 foot ceilings, all open, all light. Complete with a colony of mice, Gail has told Sarah gleefully. There’s no way anyone can keep a place like this really clean, but it doesn’t matter to Gail.

It matters to Sarah. It’s why she can’t hack roommates. The furnished rooms she stays in are hers only, and they’ve always been clean, or at least cleanable. Though it did take her three solid days to scrub this last one down. She even went in for a new coat of paint; the place looked like some kind of

crime scene, indecipherable splotches all over the walls evidence of god knows what. But the linoleum is in one piece and the other roomers are elderly types too dejected to be loud.

Her sister is drumming her fingers on the table. Gail is perpetually impatient these days, almost as perpetually outraged. At the weather, the patriarchy, the Falklands War, the Middle East, Sarah. Sarah and her preference for the study of dirt over the study of law. No, make that the practice of dirt over the practice of law. Gail's a real lawyer now.

"You are bloody wasting your life. You're twenty-five, for god's sake. Twenty-five, not eighteen."

"I know when my birthday was."

"It's five years since you finished university and you're still living in one crappy room after another, taking one crappy job after another. Pardon me. You never *did* finish university. You're one credit short of graduating and then you go and quit! One lousy course to complete and you'd have had your BA."

One lousy course she couldn't hack. One lousy course that cracked her like an egg. She had to drop it. And anyway, her major was history. What was a BA in history going to do for her?

"God, Sarah, just open your mouth, will you? Can you just say something for once? You know I hate this *silent treatment* shtick. And would you put that goddamn penny away? Just stop it!"

She didn't even know she'd taken the penny out of her pocket, was turning and turning it in her fingers. Nervous habit. She sticks it in her pocket, gets up and goes over to the counter, starts attacking the stack of dishes in the sink to calm herself down. She is not getting into a fight with Gail. And she's not going to start thinking about that damned course again.

"Will you leave my dishes alone? I know I'm a pig. Just leave them." But Gail doesn't get up, instead watches as the stack diminishes beneath Sarah's hands, swift, deft as they always are with anything physical. "Why are you sticking it out in such a dumb job? What are they paying you, anyway? Minimum?"

The handsome rent Gail is paying for her bohemian loft is easily covered by the handsome salary from her job at the law firm. Gail, the newly fledged lawyer. Sarah, on the other hand, has never earned anything more than minimum. Gail is right. *Crappy*. That's the adjective. It's been one crappy job after another. Waitressing, tending bar, even a two-week career as a cocktail waitress at the legendary rooftop bar at the Park Plaza. It's 18 months now, including layoffs, that she's been at the City Garden Centre, the longest she's worked at one job since she left university, left Winnipeg for Toronto. It's the usual Sarah job: crummy hours, seasonal lay-offs, unsafe working conditions. She's gotten to the point that she likes the smell of the place: the acid tang of pesticides that mixes with the fumes off-gassing from the plastic hoses and cheap watering cans they sell, which in turn mix with the smell of soil and moss and roots, the spice of nasturtium and geranium transplants.

Gary, her crew manager, calls Sarah 'Mighty Mouse.' She can heft a 64-quart bag of soil if she does it right, and she always does, bending at the knees, spine straight. She just grazes 5 feet and 100 pounds, but she's always been strong and the job has made her stronger.

She's studied up about plants and growing conditions and flowering seasons, and now Gary will send customers to her for recommendations. The rest of the crew isn't interested in looking stuff up, getting to know the plants, but nobody minds getting their hands dirty. Sarah likes that, likes losing herself working with her hands, letting the days melt into her work. She gets to be in her body, that strong little machine that's always willing to take on more work. That's why she's sticking with this particular crappy, minimum wage, dead-end job. At least till the next coin toss. She fingers the penny in her jeans pocket.

Gail picks at the rough edge of the table, sighs. "When's your famous boyfriend back?"

"Michael's back tomorrow."

"So you're not objecting to me calling him your boyfriend today?"

Sarah doesn't answer.

“Lucky dude gets five days in Paris on an expense account. I’m working for the wrong law firm. Has he been there before?”

Never. Sarah shakes her head.

Gail tips her chair back, runs her fingers again through her hair. “I got a call from Rose last night.”

Sarah stops doing the dishes, turns around. The room gets smaller. Rose.

“It must have been only 11:00 in Winnipeg, but when the phone rang at midnight, I nearly jumped out of my skin. She wasn’t too bad. I mean, there’ve been times I couldn’t even understand what she was trying to say, but last night she was mostly coherent. She went on for a while about her job; she sounded really worried they won’t take her back. I get that – she was pretty erratic before David finally convinced her to take sick leave.”

The last time Sarah saw their big sister Rose, in Winnipeg, she was just beginning to show. Or at least to show to anyone who knew how willowy Rose usually was – the slight bow to her belly evident only to someone who knew how concave it normally was. When they were little, Sarah would cuddle against her, her head fitting neatly in the inverse pillow of her big sister’s stomach, the rise and fall of Rose’s breathing a lullaby.

“I called Mom this morning. She was making rhubarb preserves. I had to listen to a lot about the preserves before she’d say anything about Rose. When I finally got her to talk, she told me that David really wants Rose to get onto antidepressants. Now. Their GP is on board, says it’s urgent. Even Mom and Dad are pretty much convinced. But Rose is refusing to take anything, she says she doesn’t want to be drugged.”

Sarah’s finished the dishes and now there’s nothing for her to do. She sits back down at the table.

“I don’t know, Sarah, she just can’t seem to get over it.” Gail’s frowning, picking at the table again.

It. The baby.

Just because Gail doesn’t want kids doesn’t mean Rose shouldn’t.

And Rose did. She and David were always deciding things, planning, and

they'd had this pregnancy all figured out. Rose would have three whole months paid maternity leave, thank you Unemployment Insurance. Pat, their mom, empty-nested and eager to jump back into her role as the perfect mother, was set to babysit three days a week when Rose did go back to work. It was all planned out.

They really wanted that baby.

"The GP says she *has* to go on antidepressants." Gail's voice has gone flat. "It's clinical depression, he says, not just her feeling down."

It's the first Sarah's heard of the expression.

Gail puts on her smart-big-sister-to-dumb-little-sister voice. "Clinical depression is the medical term for a depression that isn't just a mood. There's an actual chemical imbalance that impairs brain function. She's sick. Physically. That's why they want to put her on antidepressants."

"Do *you* think she should go on medication?"

"I don't know," Gail says. "She might be getting better. She didn't sound as bad as last time, I don't think. David told Mom that Rose is sleeping a bit better. I don't know... Maybe she *should* try a course of medication, just to help get her over this hump. But she'll get over it. It was just a miscarriage. She can have more kids. The doctor told them it was insignificant in terms of her fertility."

Just a miscarriage. Insignificant. Rose loved that baby already. It was almost full term. And then she had to carry it for weeks, *weeks*, waiting to give birth to a dead baby. How is it possible in the twentieth century that a woman has to carry this dead thing in her for weeks, and modern science can't just take it away, let her bury it, let her bury what she hoped for, what she already loved? "She loved that baby, Gail."

Sarah sees the look on Gail's face, knows she's picked the wrong word, knows what's coming.

"Just what exactly are you saying?" Gail's starting to flush. "Are you saying a foetus is a person? You, of all people?"

Is Gail going to pick a fight? Is she going to start up on a woman's right

to choose now? When they're talking about Rose? "No. But I'm saying she loved that baby before it was born. It almost was born."

"It wasn't a *baby*, Sarah! You can't call it a *baby* when it's still in utero!"

There's no point trying to talk this out with Gail, whose face has gone a deep dusky rose, her narrow chest rising hard with each breath.

"For fuck sake, Sarah, where would you be if you hadn't had a safe abortion when you were a teenager? What the hell is wrong with you?"

She should know better than to try talking to her impossible sister. Sarah gets up from the table, starts wiping down Gail's counter, swabbing the rings under the detergent bottle, the crumbs under the toaster. She has to do something. She has to be doing something. She can feel Gail fuming behind her, but she won't turn around, she won't look back.



The abortion's become this cautionary tale Sarah tells herself, told her boyfriend Michael when they met a year and a half ago, two sentences: *when I was sixteen and having sex for the first time I got pregnant. I had a safe abortion at the Morgentaler Clinic in Montreal.* On the Spadina streetcar home from Gail's, she wonders what would have happened if the story had been different, if she hadn't gotten the abortion.

Sarah watches a kid at the back of the streetcar playing air guitar with a buddy. Her highschool boyfriend, Nick, played lead guitar in a band he'd put together. She loved to watch his mouth while he played, he had to hold his mouth just so, really hard and tight, as if he were holding the music back, keeping it inside. Their best song, "Gloria," the one they practised over and over, only had three chords. The chorus spelled out the letters – *gee-el-oh-are-I-ay* – so that they were almost words, almost meant something. Gloria made the boy feel good, *all right*, but what the hell did *she* feel? Gail no doubt would have a lot to say about that omission, about the repression of female sexuality.

At sixteen Sarah knew almost nothing about sex, even the basic mechanics

were fuzzy. No real sex-ed in schools in those days. And Pat, her mom, for all her being the perfect cookies-in-the-oven, kitchen-floor-gleaming mom, was too embarrassed to ever give Sarah the birds-and-bees talk. She was too shy to ask Rose, and Gail didn't seem interested in boys. So it was all hit or miss. Sarah tried looking *sex* up in the Encyclopaedia Britannica in the basement, but all she managed to find were a lot of colour diagrams of internal organs.

Nick waged a steady campaign for *going all the way*. He knew Sarah didn't mean to be a cockteaser, but she was leading him on. And he told her about blue balls, how if they just kept fooling around but she didn't let him have sex, this mysterious awful painful thing would happen to him. She'd had no idea boys were so fragile – they were supposed to be the tough ones. Sarah didn't like the pressure. And she *really* didn't want to get pregnant. So part of her thought, *no way. Go find yourself a girl who's easy, Nick.*

But a bigger part wanted to go along.

And it wasn't because of Nick's dumb arguments. It was because before Nick, and his hands, and his mouth, there were times she felt like one of those cheap chocolate Easter eggs, so hollow with loneliness she could break. So finally one day, on the sofa in the rec room, they did it. After, she asked Nick if he shouldn't use a safe next time, he could get a safe, couldn't he? At a drugstore? He said wearing a condom was like washing your feet with your socks on: it wouldn't be any fun for him. So a few days later Sarah went on her own to the Mount Carmel Clinic to get condoms. *Mount Carmel*. It sounded like a candy bar. The Clinic was great. Everybody knew you could get birth-control information and pregnancy tests and condoms there, and they wouldn't tell anyone. But she never did work up the nerve to ask Nick to use them. They used the rhythm method, because what were the odds, Nick said.

Good, as it happened. They must have been having sex for almost a month and the box of condoms still hadn't been opened. And she was late.

She kept thinking she couldn't be pregnant so soon, they'd only had sex five, maybe six times. Then another day and another went by with no period.

How was she going to finish school if she was knocked up? What was she supposed to do with a baby? Sarah remembers the crazy little conversations, bargains she started making in her head: she'd never do it with anyone ever again as long as she got away with it just this once. She'd run away from home, live on the streets, hide in someone's barn. Not tell anyone and give birth in a field, like those women in China, leave the baby on church steps, synagogue steps.

Nothing in her wanted this.

She told Nick she was almost ten days late. She could go back to the Clinic, he told her, she could get a test. And the Clinic could give her a referral for an abortion, if she was pregnant and decided she didn't want it. Abortion was legal in New York. And there was the Morgentaler clinic in Montreal. Sarah knew she was too young, she couldn't have a baby. She couldn't tell her parents, she was too scared. But she could tell her big sister Rose. She'd tell Rose because Rose would know what to do, Rose would tell her what to do.

Which she did. Which was to get an abortion.

The truth is, for all that the story is boiled down now to two tidy sentences, Sarah has this ghost count in her head, how old her kid would be if she hadn't had the abortion. Boy or girl, she doesn't know, could they even tell the sex that early? But she didn't ask.

Eight. The kid would be eight. Briefly her mind flits to a gawky kid, good at baseball, track and field, like her. Good at maths, like her.

She stops herself. The streetcar bumps along the tracks heading north up Spadina. Sarah hauls on the window to open it, she needs the breeze on her face.

Where would she be if she hadn't had access to a safe abortion, what would she be? She sure wouldn't be her sister Gail, who even as a teenager was way too smart to get knocked up. Her sister the crackerjack newly minted lawyer, the success. No. And not Rose either, the perfect sister, who waited until everything was in place – the devoted husband, the stable job – before she got pregnant with the kid she decided to have, wanted to have.

If Sarah hadn't had the abortion, she'd be what she is now, a loser scraping by on minimum wage. And on top of that, she'd be a single mom in some basement dive in Winnipeg.

And how would she feel about the son or daughter who'd kept her from graduating high school?

She can't imagine not loving a kid.