



The Penny

by Dorothy Bentley

Inspired by Astrid Dézèntjé

The cathedral bells bonged in the distance across The Hague courtyard as Ellie rushed past the tall hedges to school. At those tall hedges, Protestant preachers had shared their message where they could easily duck from the authorities. Tensions between the Protestants and Catholics were high as King Philip took the throne centuries before, but now there was a quiet tension which Ellie could not name. Regardless, she could not be late: Sister Mary did not tolerate disobedience. Ellie's mother, her Oma, and her Oma's Oma, all the way back to the 16th Century had all attended this same girls' school near The Hague with its red brick exterior, stone floors, and unadorned walls.

It was springtime, and the school's windows were open allowing warm air to sweep along Ellie's face as she rushed down the hallways to join her class of eight-year-olds filed into two tight rows. She had made it just in time for the Gregorian chants, and Ellie was excited to be beside the new girl who had brought a new skipping-rope to school. The new girl had ten pennies to spend every week while Ellie had none. With the Second World War still a recent event, Ellie's parents could not spare even one penny for her. She must make do with her old jump-rope.

“Hands by your side,” Sister Mary whipped the ruler back and forth across the top of the podium.

Ellie winced. She had seen others with their hands held out receiving a lashing from Sister Mary. She did not intend to be one of them. Yet bubbles inside her stomach percolated up and made her twitch. She wanted to whisper to the new girl to save her spot for Double-Dutch with the skipping-rope, to tell the girls that she was rightfully next. Just then, a gust of air blew Sister Mary’s sheet music to the floor. She was busy poking another student with her ruler, edging her into proper alignment. Ellie stooped to pick up the sheaf from the floor. Once it was safe in her clasp, Ellie tapped on Sister Mary’s arm.

The Sister’s movements came to a halt and she jerked around to face the interruption.

“Excuse me, Sister. Here is your music,” said Ellie.

“What are you doing?” Sister Mary snapped.

“Did you see how the wind blew your music to the floor?” Ellie said.

“I am the one asking questions!”

The bubbles which had made Ellie squirm with excitement suddenly gave her a sore stomach.

“Go and stand in the corner for interrupting!” The Sister jabbed in the direction of a corner at the back of the room, away from the new girl, away from her chance of being next at Double-Dutch today.

“Yes, Sister,” Ellie said.

“You had better hold up your arms as well, so that you remember not to poke me.”

Ellie’s face burned as she shuffled her feet to the corner. Her heart ached; she had only tried to help, but she could not answer back to Sister Mary again for then she would surely be strapped with the ruler. She had examined other student’s hands after such an unbraiding. Their hands were angry and swollen. Tears sprang from her eyes. She did not want anyone to see, so she bent her head downward while she held up her arms.

After the dam broke and she let all the water rush out from her eyes, Ellie felt calmer. Suddenly, the angle of the light shifted through the open schoolroom window, and a tiny speck of light caught her eye. It was a shiny penny on the floor in the corner. Her Oma’s words came to her: “Always be thankful, even for a penny.” Although the new girl had ten pennies every week, Ellie thrilled at the thought of a whole penny to herself. With a penny, she could buy all sorts of things. Her face brightening thinking about it. With a penny, she could buy sweets. With a penny, she could buy Jacks. With a penny, she had the

beginnings of purchasing a prayer candle for her Oma. She quickly picked up the penny and put it into her pocket. Her heart felt light and free. She held up her arms with new energy. She knew what she wanted to do with her penny.

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Ellie snuggled against the side of her husband, Piet, as they leaned against the railing of the Maasdam, a ship which held two thousand souls. They waved to their families at Rotterdam Port, excited to be going to Canada, a place where they would be able to find their very own apartment without the five-to-ten-year wait. Since their wedding, they had not been able to live together. Ellie's stomach lurched as the ship pulled anchor leaving the only place she had ever known; but her husband, a recent transplant from Indonesia, assured her it was for the best. Other than the penny in her pocket, Ellie had brought just one trunk. It held her precious wedding gifts: crystal glasses, a vase, and figurines made by her uncle, a gifted artisan in Holland. She turned her face up to Piet. In Holland, he was treated rudely because of his brown skin; perhaps in Canada things would be different. He was sure of himself and sure of their plan. They would go to Canada and make a go of it. He had worked hard at his trade anywhere that would hire him, and they had saved to make the journey to their new home.

Ellie felt the penny in her pocket, gently holding it between her fingers. At their wedding, her Oma, restricted to a wheelchair, had pressed it into her palm. “Thank you for the Kleurbal, Ellie. Remember... always be thankful, even for a penny.” The penny was smooth except for a miniscule chip on one edge which caught on her finger. She thought about the penny she had found when she was eight. At the store, she had bought marble-like Kleurbal. They were sweet and when savoured, the marble exterior sloughed-off and it transformed, first to blue, then to pink, then another colour. There were many combinations and one never knew which colour to expect. Ellie had bought two candies which she shuffled in her pocket on her walk home. When she pushed through the gate into her yard, there was Oma, sitting in the spring sunshine on a cushioned patio chair.

“I have something for you,” Ellie said. “Put out your hand.”

“What is it, child?” her Oma said.

“You’ll see!” Ellie felt as if her heart would burst.

Oma held out her hand like a child, and Ellie placed the Kleurbal onto her palm. Oma’s giggle was like the bell on the store door where her Oma used to be a clerk, the store right next to the girls’ school, and on every payday, Oma would bring Ellie one Kleurbal. Now she was too old to work and the cushions on the patio chair eased her tired bones. Ellie sat in the vacant chair next to Oma’s.

They both popped the candy into their mouths and sucked, settling into the pleasure of their rare treat.

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Ellie inhaled the ocean wind while she held the penny, thinking of her Oma. It was going to be fine, she exhaled. While others near here became sick over the edge, quickly retreating to their cabins, Ellie and Piet enjoyed the benefit of their inherited sea-legs. On board, they enjoyed their long-awaited honeymoon with dancing and scrumptious meals. They were a little sad it all had to end when the Maasdam reached its berth at Quebec City. From the shipyard, they boarded a bus to Montreal. In Montreal, Ellie was reminded of Westside Story, a paperback she'd recently read. It was written after the musical was produced in New York. How like New York this Montreal neighbourhood looked, with its brick buildings and jangling fire-escapes, like a life-sized game of snakes and ladders. So unlike Holland, Ellie thought, as she noticed Black people working all around the train station and in the restaurant. Is this the only type of work they do here, she wondered? From the bus terminal, they boarded a CNR passenger train. They would travel around the clock to Winnipeg, and Moose Jaw, then Edmonton, and finally, after a transfer onto the Dayliner, they would arrive in Calgary. Through the northern route, Ellie wondered at the vast unoccupied forest and countless lakes. Here there was more space than they

knew what to do with, she thought. When they finally arrived in Calgary, it was snowing. “Welcome to Canada!” said the porter.

After just a few nights in a hotel on MacLeod Trail, Ellie and Piet moved into their first apartment together, and six weeks later, Ellie’s trunk finally arrived. She fetched the penny from her coat pocket from her own closet where the coat was housed as spring finally bloomed in Calgary. There were even tulips blooming, reminding her of Holland. Ellie slipped the penny from her Oma into her trunk. In Canada she did not need such meager wishes. She heard the penny trickle down along the side of the crystal vase and glasses and the figurines. Ellie imagined her items in her future home, with her future children, in the house Piet and she would buy. Ellie and Piet were finally living together as a married couple, but Ellie’s wish to have their own house seemed like an impossible dream with Calgary booming and the prices sky-high. They decided to move north.

In a pre-owned Pontiac, the size of some apartments in Holland, Piet drove north while Ellie knitted. The asphalt soon ended and the car bounced along a gravel road full of pot-holes the size of moon craters. The trees lining the road became an endless stream of questions: Where is this place we are going? Will we ever arrive? If the car breaks down, will anyone find us? How can people live in this frontier? Are there grocery stores there? It was an endless day, but

finally, their car burst out of the endless forest into a large clearing called Fort McMurray.

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“Oma—hold out your hand.”

“What is it, child?” Ellie asked.

“You’ll see.” Ellie’s grandson’s smooth face twinkled with his surprise.

Ellie put out her hand. Her grandson plopped a Kleurbal onto her palm. She burst out laughing. Her laughter was not like her Oma’s bell-like sound. Instead it was the hearty laugh of a frontier woman who had worked hard, had struggled, had raised a daughter and attended college. There had been so much laughter over the years in their new home. Ellie’s trunk had made it here, too, with her treasures inside.

Ellie had not laughed for the past two months. Not since the flood. She and Piet had lived in this house for thirty-eight years. It was their dream-come-true home. The trunk from Holland had been in the basement when the river came in. Ellie was too old now to go downstairs, too old to help clear out the basement full of river sediment, so others had taken her things outside. Much of their belongings had unceremoniously been taken to the dump. Where were her treasures? –her crystal glasses, her vase, her figurines?

When the water rose, she'd been taken to the hospital and Piet had gone to a hotel. It was just like when they were newlyweds in the Holland—together but separate. Surely there was something to be thankful for even now, but Ellie could not think of anything. There were no more pennies now, just plastic cards to charge things.

There was a different flood before, but that one did not come into the house. That one made a lake in the back yard for the ducks. This time, she had been watching the ravens in the yard. She gave them her breakfast toast. She did not feel like eating. The ravens kept away the magpies which ate the garden-food Piet grew. There was one which kept coming, even after all the other ravens stopped. Ellie named it Degas, after the French painter. She thought she saw a tutu on it one day, but she shook her head and the image disappeared.



“Oma, look; it’s red!” Ellie’s grandson pulled the Kleurbal from his mouth.

“Yes, my sweet. You are sweet, too!” She gently pinched his cheeks. He sat in the deck chair next to hers, and they watched as Piet, her daughter, and her older grandson picked through the tall grass looking for items from the basement. Ellie’s heart softened watching Piet. He wore age like a heavy coat; but it could not stop him. There had been brand new tires there. They could have sold them, but Piet and Ellie found the rightful owner two doors down. They’d found other items from neighbours, and all had found their proper homes. Ellie’s trunk had been taken to the dump in the rush right after the flood, two whole months ago. She felt an ache rise up, but, she thought, she cannot take even one of her treasures with her when she passes. Perhaps one day, Ellie imagined, archeologists would dig through the rubble at the dump and find her treasures. She sucked on her Kleurbal and watched Degas squawking at the top of a tree.

The sun shifted and a sparkle of light caught Ellie’s eye. She held up a hand to shield her eyes, and then she saw it. It was partially buried by river-silt, but there it was: a penny.

“Sweet One, go and get that for me, will you?” Ellie said. Her grandson hopped from his perch and dug the penny out of the ground. He brought it to Ellie, and she held it with her fingers now lined and worn from years of cooking and knitting, drawing and painting, holding Piet, her daughter, and then her

grandsons. She ran her eager finger around the penny's edge. It was a Dutch penny; could it be the same one? There was the snag, catching on her finger. Her breath caught in her throat.

“My Oma said, always be thankful, even for a penny,” Ellie said. That was a hard thought to swallow, she mused, even with the sweetness of the Kleurbal. Her memories tumbled around her mind. There was so much green here, like the tall hedges at The Hague. The Protestants lived with the Catholics, and they all lived with the Mosque down the way, and there were the drum beats and the sashes dancing at Métis Days. The Dutch people had survived their deluges and had built berms; they must finish the berms here. And she did not know here if the colour of one's skin mattered. Perhaps to some; but more often than not, one kindness was exchanged for another. When there was an injustice, one could at least speak-up and try to right it—no more standing in corners. Maybe she could be thankful for that.

Ellie remembered being a child in Holland and how they had prayed for snow. When it snowed, it meant it was cold enough to freeze the canals so they could skate. She laughed softly then, thinking of the countless snowflakes she had been given since arriving in Canada. Maybe she could be thankful for that.

Ellie and her grandson savored their Kleurbals. All of the thirty-eight years in their home up until now had been so full, so full of good things. Degas

squawked and flew off towards the river. The years had gone by like a New York musical in many ways, with many, many happy endings. Now there was this one sour note—all her treasures gone. She thought of her Oma and the Kleurbal she'd savoured, and the penny her Oma had given her at her wedding. What a rare gift that was when she and her husband were just married, and now that very same penny was again in her hand. That was enough, Ellie decided.

“Sweet One; hold out your hand,” Ellie said.

“What is it, Oma?” He held out his smooth palm, and Ellie placed the penny on it.

“Wow!” he beamed and put it into his pocket.

They watched the squirrels in the trees full of leaves in the full June sun. Ellie wondered how many more springs she would see.

“You won't believe it, Ellie” called Piet. He was at the back of the yard, raking through the tall grass. He moved slowly, but he pushed himself.

“Try me!” Ellie called. She recalled the comfort of his side on the ship and the fun they had had dancing on the sea. Their honeymoon boat floating through time; Degas danced along the fence now. She will do a painting, she thought, with Degas in a pink tutu. Soon, she would dance along with him.

“It's your crystal!” Piet said.

Author's Note

This short story was inspired by the true adventures of Astrid Dézèntjé as conveyed to Dorothy Bentley during several lively phone visits within The Art in Conversation Project, sponsored by Arts Council Wood Buffalo and the St. Aidan's Society. All of the elements in the story are true; however, some have been altered, emphasized, or embellished for literary affect. Astrid's first penny in the corner is very real, as is the Fort McMurray flood of 2020 with its ensuing devastation, and her found crystal. Moreover, her reasons for emigrating are true, and our efforts to resist and counter discrimination must persist. Degas, a real raven, may be seen dancing near the Clearwater River.

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