

Dirck Toll

Excess Fortune

Immediately beyond the onset of darkness on a warm evening, he happened to see a penny reclined on the sidewalk. With a small surge of delight-ripples, he halted in midstride, reached groundward, and seized that coin.

After just a few resumed steps, he noticed another penny similarly supine on the sidewalk.

The first penny hadn't been unconditionally shiny but still had some luster to it; the second penny was definitely the rich brown color of a penny that had been around the block, that had tasted Life, that knew the score, that had done all the things a penny should never do. And in the scheme of sheer economics any penny is still a penny, so with delight now doubled, he bent from the waist and retrieved the second one.

He was primed to straighten up, but saw yet another penny about half a meter from the one now in his grasp. Still bent, he made a simianesque shuffle in its direction and picked it up. Then he re-erected his frame and put the two

more-recently-acquired coins with the first, in one of his favorite pockets.

Eyeing the sidewalk with a little finer interest than was his custom, he continued on his way. He'd completed no more than another three strides when two more pennies, one partially collapsed atop the other, presented themselves to him on the concrete footpath. He promptly aided those in joining the others.

From the contiguous events of the last few seconds, his thoughts extrapolated: If five pennies were laying about the immediate vicinity, the likelihood that a total of six or seven or more could be accumulated by someone who took the time to look was high enough to make it worthwhile to do so.

He commenced to deliberately search for more samples of the smallest denomination of currency manufactured by the government of the American United States.

He hadn't looked significantly long in time or distance before he'd found twelve more single-centers. A nominal number of people had footed by while the gathering was underway, but zero of them had seemed to take any notice of the action. Nor had any of them chanced to see a penny and themselves pick it up, which was perhaps not what would be expected given the number of pennies available, but not quite strange.

With the sum of seventeen-hundredths of a dollar sometimes making a jangle in his favorite pocket as he moved, he continued looking there and thither, self-assured that another penny was probably nearby on that block on that side of the street.

Finding the next one used up almost twenty minutes.

During this span he had flexed himself into many different postures — some of them rude to the objective observer — in

order to view the scape of the sidewalk from rare angles, with the expectation that he might thus see a penny bouncing light from the streetlamps. Smiling had turned to sigh-facing when the progenitor of one such reflection was unmasked as a candy wrapper of foil. Deflation became aggravation when the next reflection was traced to a cap of bottle. Bilioussness was altered to peace when the eighteenth was placed not by its light-spoor, but by foot-moving in frustration a small pulpy amount of news tabloid and finding the penny in what had been its underneath.

The eighteenth was the only one to date that had been earnestly uneasy to find, and the period required to find it persuaded him that the total was reaching its limit. Had the discovery of coin nineteen just a few steps away not been almost effort-free, he might have quit at eighteen. But the facility with which the eighteenth's ordinal successor was located induced him to set the cut-off point firmly at twenty. Nineteen seemed not only numerically odd, it didn't seem like an appropriate final tally for a quantity of something, especially when compared to the number right after it: the even, divisible-by-five, divisible-by-ten, number Twenty. *There* was a number to round things out, round them off, and round them up.

It was considerably darker than when he'd found the first penny. Still comfortably warm. Occasionally a quarter-moon, its luminosity dimmed slightly by the incandescence of the city, glanced between clouds. Hardly anyone was around.

He began the search for the last penny.

He hadn't yet checked the street itself. Traffic was light and he could ear-sense a car if one approached, so he walked into the thoroughfare and began examining the

pavement, anticipating that this would complete the tender harvest in no amount of time.

Thirty-two diligent minutes of scrutinizing the macadam from one terminus of the block to nearly the other yielded him no success. At the point at which he neared the other end, as his gaze passed from a stretch of pavement to the trunk of a subcompact, it occurred to him that he hadn't looked *under* the parked cars. He quickly, but nonetheless thoroughly, finished looking at the roadbed to the conclusion of the block, then directly went to the nearest stationary auto, dropped to his hands and knees, and bent to peer under it.

There was not enough illumination there to make anything visible. Blackness. Void. He felt in a pocket for his keys, and brought them out with the miniature flashlight that ornamented the keychain.

It worked as good as it ever did, which in this situation meant it impelled a beam just lengthy enough that he could, by moving on all fours around all four sides of the car, make out all the area underneath it.

After not finding the penny under that one, he crawled the pace or two to the next car and began repeating the procedure. The hardness of the pavement was already biting into his knees and the hand he used to balance himself while holding the flashlight in the other. He was planning to stand and stretch when the front tire of a bicycle thudded into his left side.

The bike fell sideways and its rider pitched forward at an angle away from the car, rolling to a surprised sitstill. Having exuded something close to a scream at the point of impact, he now clutched his side and found that the pain, while throbbing and definite, was not severe and indicated no dislocated or professionally damaged bones, organs, or tissues. The cyclist

had been moving quite slowly; his helmet, elbow- and kneepads, and reflective jacket and pants indicated that this moderate speed was in line with a safety-conscious nature.

The cyclist sprang up and the parties exchanged recriminating words. No explanation was offered for being on all fours in the road in the dark, nor was any offered for not having seen someone on all fours in the road in the dark. Both tempers were quickly spent, and then it was determined that damage to persons and property appeared relievedly unpursuable.

The cyclist then asked if a dog had been seen around there. The response was that one had not. A large brown dog. No, it had not. It might try to jump up on one as it was friendly, but there was no need for concern, as it was friendly. Impatience grew; it had not been seen. Quite a large dog, but friendly. It was reasserted that these facts had been noted. Ultimately, mutual admonitions for the exercise of greater caution were offered, and the cyclist moved off.

He sighed, and slowly dropped to his hands and knees again, favoring his right side. Almost an hour later, he stood up from looking under the final car, and leaned against it. His persistence had culled such treasures as a crushed wristwatch, half of a pair of sunglasses, a rusty nail file, two nickels, and part of either a hat or a vest. The penny had not been forthcoming, and the two nickels, being currency yet being nickels, in no way doused his fervor.

His clothes were now spotted with dirt and grease and torn in several places. His knees and back were sore from crouching. His side held a steadfast ache from its vis-a-vis with the bicycle. He needed a shave.

He crossed his arms over his stomach and held his sides,

and bent forward nearly double. He held that position and took five or six deep breaths.

As he was about to straighten up, he realized that although he had adopted various awkward postures when trying to view the sidewalk from diverse angles, and had exhausted all of them achievable by a human organism of typical anatomy, he'd only assumed those postures from his full natural height and below. Now it occurred to him that if he were to obtain a perspective *above* his full height, the sought-after glint of copper could possibly be espied.

Several small trees and the steps in front of various buildings were now seen as potentially useful, as were the hoods of cars. But the location that would gift him with the keenest vantage and broadest field would be as close to a light source as possible. Therefore, the best policy was to step up on the staunch base of a streetlamp and pan the sidewalk from there.

This neighborhood had been revitalized about three calendars earlier, and the revitalization had included the installation of new streetlamps designed to look like old streetlamps. The bulb was encased in a striking gaslight-styled globe, and ornate metalwork filigree decorated the base and post. This changed things. He saw now that he could, thanks to the metalwork, climb the post nearly to the top, be a total of roughly three meters above the sidewalk, and certainly be able to see sharp light reflected from that last cent.

He paused as he was about to begin the ascent. There was an obscure memory of the revitalization project sparking some controversy when it was alleged that the subcontractor for the work had used substandard materials. Visions of the lamppost buckling in the middle as he neared the summit,

or, as an alternative, his skeleton being illuminated through his skin as he completed a short circuit, swirled to mind. But then he remembered that the allegations about the posts had been unequivocally disproven, and the city had ultimately been required to pay substantial damages to the contractor for besmirchment of character.

Trepidation dispelled, he started climbing. Although the filigree provided plenty of locations for hands and feet, none were at angles or positions that hands and feet easily adapted to. But he found that with frequent rests and constant shifting of weight, he could gradually make altitude.

Because of the intensity of the light, he was looking aside while climbing, and happened to focus on a car tire.

Tires.

Certainly.

He'd looked under the cars, but what about under their tires? Wasn't it just likely that the twentieth penny had rolled into the street from whatever its source, spiraled to a stop, and then been parked upon by a driver oblivious to its presence? He knew that to check this he'd have to roll each car back and forth or if they were locked he'd have to get a jack from somewhere, maybe ask somebody in one of the apartments. And as he looked at the tire he noticed a drain grate and while he'd checked the sidewalk itself and was sort of checking above it now, he hadn't checked *below* it, so suppose the penny had fallen down the grate — happens all the time — he'd have to find the nearest manhole and lift the cover off somehow maybe use the jack for that and go down it and check around below the grates on that side of the block and the light wouldn't be too good but he'd have to hope for the best.

He could only climb another half-meter on the post, and, invigorated by the new prospects, he ascended this last distance with less delicacy than he'd been using to that point. Perhaps this reduction in delicacy is what caused him to hear loud cracking noises from below, accompanied by the post and himself making a slight but distinct arc in the direction of the side he hung from.

Desperately certain that the vindication of the lamppost contractor's practices couldn't have been a miscarriage of the justice that maintains the human beast in a habitat of order, he looked down.

No. There was thankfully nothing wrong with the post. But the sidewalk holding the bolts that anchored its base was cracking into heart-halting little pieces like sunbaked mud.

Yes, come to think of it, there had also been allegations about the contractor for the *sidewalk* renovation; allegations that remained yet unresolved.

Sweat became a second layer of clothing. He realized that he could soon be toppling the three meters or so to the sidewalk. That would undoubtedly draw a lot of attention to the scene. That would probably hamper the search. That was to be avoided. He had to make sure he got down by the same route he got up. After looking around very very cautiously, moving only his head, and determining that no penny's reflection could be spotted, he took a deep breath, held it, and began inching his way downward.

Some ominous creaking accompanied this first move and he stopped instantly. But the post hadn't shifted any more. He'd be able to make it down without incident or injury. He gave a sigh of relief. Confidence welled. Then a large brown dog appeared.

The carefree canine came trotting around the corner and down the sidewalk, oblivious to the postborne presence. Subliminally averring that this was the way things should remain, he kept absolutely still and concentrated the fullness of his mental energy on forcing the dog to continue to be oblivious to him.

This did not work. Somehow, one or several of those super-sharp doggie senses picked up the signal that a person was nearby, and that doggie noggin started jerking around frantically, looking for the source of the signal. About five jerks was all it took, and then the friendly body as a whole began bounding enthusiastically toward the source, as the source, anticipating the inevitable result, began scrambling down the post.

He wasn't fast enough. The dog reached the base and, without slowing down from its sprint toward it, began jumping against it with forepaws outstretched.

Two jumps was all it took.

With several loud crackles, the anchor bolts pulled completely free of the sidewalk, and he became extremely religious as the post and himself swung earthward. He let go of it, somehow expecting that this might mean that it alone would continue dropping while he stayed where he was. It did not happen like that and they both reached the sidewalk at about the same time, though the post made considerably more noise when it did.

Then all sound abruptly ceased, leaving a quiet that felt inappropriate for the occasion.

As lights blinked on in the apartments lining the block, he drew his splayed limbs toward his torso and worked himself into a sitting position. He had landed about two meters from

the lamp. The dog was gone, having scampered in a panic at the first sign of events not going as expected.

He was very tremorous. And bruised. And scraped. And sore. But nothing seemed to be broken or cracked or ruptured. He put a hand into the pocket that held the pennies found so far, brought them out, and counted them. None had been lost.

Some people were looking out their windows. A few had come outside and were unsure whether to see if the person by the lamp was all right or keep their distance from an enigmatic and possibly dangerous situation.

He curled the hand holding the pennies into a loose fist and shook them lightly, half-listening to the clinking. He looked at the lamp. At the cars. At their tires. At a manhole. At himself.

He pulled himself to his feet, rubbing his side, as a siren became faintly audible. He stood for a few seconds. He looked at the pennies once again. And then he gave them all a light underhand toss into the air, and watched them land and scatter.

He began to walk away, but stopped. He reached into another pocket, felt around, and brought out a penny of his own. He flicked it in the average direction of the others. Then he walked on.