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A Taste of Pennies

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Betty Fouch  A Taste of Pennies
When Peter limped into the kitchen at 5:30, he saw right away what she was up to. Dinner to be served promptly. A centerpiece of homegrown pansies. Ripe olives. Even a tablecloth. She was buttering him up for another movie. Another evening with him babysitting while she made a double-featured escape with Mary Michelson.

She came to him smiling. "The answer is no," he announced flatly. His wrists were on fire as he whipped out the words.

With imperturbable calm she replied, "I haven't said anything yet, dear." Her lips were shaped to his desire as she offered the evening kiss. He kissed her with pleasure even as his ankles burned.

He hung his wool tweed sportcoat carefully on the back of a kitchen chair. He said, "You're not going out again tonight." It sounded final. She chuckled.

"Again? What do you mean again?" She turned her back to him and gave her attention to the flame under the sizzling roundsteak. He wanted to pat her round, firm bottom. Instead, he reached for the evening paper.

"I hope there's plenty of hot water. After two hours on three street-cars, I'm bushed. Where's Chris?"

"Hot water! You'll be in the bathroom all night! Chris is out playing.
Can't you take care of your skin after I get home? I told you this morning Mary and I have to leave by 6:30. We're going way over to the Tivoli on 63rd and Cottage Grove."

A small blond boy slammed the screen door and entered the kitchen. "Warren hit me," he stated.

Ignoring the announcement, she said to Peter, "Here, hang onto him while I find some clean pajamas for him."

Peter snatched the child from the floor and gave him a bear-hug.

"Have fun today, buddy?"

"I hit Warren on the head," he replied. He wriggled out of his father's arms and scrambled onto a stool beside the table. He snatched a black olive and munchpd it happily.

Peter reached for an olive too, then switched on the radio. As he listened to Bing Crosby croon about a pocketful of dreams, he had to laugh. She had let out all the stops. Roundsteak. Black olives. Chocolate pudding for dessert, no doubt. He scratched at his dry skin absentmly.

"Hard day at the office, dear?" She swiftly spooned out his favorite green beans onto Fiesta plates. "Del Monte. French-style. Your favorites," she confirmed.

"Hard day?" He reflected, enjoying her legs for the millionth time. "No, I don't suppose my days are as hard as yours." He had followed her for blocks when he first met her, watching those splendid limbs cross streets, mount curbs, climb stairs.

"Peter, will you please not start your sarcasm. It's only a movie,
not a lover's tryst. Anything to get away from this Defense Worker's Paradise for one evening." To the boy, "Get away from the olives."

"Four hours commuting every day in Chicago traffic has given me a sharp tongue. I carry enough street-car transfers around to choke a wallet." The skin in the folds of his elbows was particularly itchy at the moment. "And if Van Johnson is in the movie, it's a lover's tryst."

"Look, I'm glad you were 4-F and I'm grateful that he have a roof over our heads in a housing shortage and I'm thrilled that we only pay $54.25 rent every month when you're making $200—but do I have to stay home every night and listen to the radio while you soak your skin?" She served the food as she spoke.

The best defense is a good offense he had learned long ago. "Where's the butter?" he accused.

"Oh, darn. It's in the icebox. Go get it while I cut Chris's meat."

"No, I'm not going to get anything. My feet are throbbing. You get the butter and I'll cut the meat."

As he concentrated on the steak, carefully cutting thin strips in the orderly manner of a mechanical engineer—which he was—Jo Stafford's fudgy voice, thick with love, oozed from the radio.

"How come Chris is so quiet?" she called from the Futility Room.

Peter looked up from his work. "His mouth is crammed with olives."

She giggled and put the butter on the table.

"Can't you keep an eye on him?" His body now itched from scalp to sole.

"Sure, honey. And one eye on the stove and one eye on the clock."

She emptied Chris's mouth expertly by pinching his cheeks with her thumb and forefinger. The olives were disposed of and the milk, which he had by then spilt, was wiped from the high chair and floor. "THRILL OF A ROMANCE starts at 7:15. Tonight's the last night. I've got to hurry or we'll miss the beginning."

"I told you that you're not going out." Firmly. Then, "Who's in THRILL OF A ROMANCE—besides Van Johnson?"

"Esther Williams." She ignored his tone. "The companion feature is JACK THE RIPPER with Laird Cregar."

"Never heard of him. Looks like my companion feature is Chris Benson," he added glumly.

She swiftly cleared the table of dinnerplates, straightened the centerpiece, and hurried back to the icebox where the chocolate pudding was sweating it out.

Peter's face still burned. If he could find a cure for this damned dermatitis, he knew she'd stay at home. An hour of soaking in a hot tub and then covering the bad spots with this new coal-tar ointment would relieve the tension.

He watched her place the small offering of pudding in front of him.
"Don't look at me that way. I did my bit today. I pushed the baby to the airport in his Joywalker. Two joyous miles each way. We looked at all sorts of fun airplanes. It's your turn now."

The baby said, "I want gum."

"Have some tasty pudding, sweetie." Then for Peter's benefit she added, "Mommy will bring Chris some gum from the Tivoli."

He watched her bend over the high chair, generous breasts in profile. He rose, pretending to reach for a glass from the cupboard. Instead, he stopped behind her and, as she straightened up, cupped his hands against her suppleness. "You win," he whispered. He bobbed down to taste her velvet shoulder.

"Don't." She twisted expertly. He was left with cupped hands holding nothing.

"Help Chris get the chocolate off his hands and face," she instructed coolly. "His pajamas are on top of the clothesbasket behind the dining room door."

When he emerged from the bathroom with Chris, she was buttoning the top button of a white, ruffled blouse. She stood in the bedroom preparing to step into a pink cotton skirt.

"Stop scratching," she said to him. "Your skin looks terrible. I have to shake the sheets every morning. Flakes of skin in your pajamas. Flakes of skin on the floor. In your socks. Splotches of blood everywhere. How do I look?"

She knew she was pretty. The pink and white set off her dark eyes and high color. For answer, he took her arms and pushed her onto the bed. He inhaled the softness of her fragrant hair.

"Come on, Peter, I'll be late. You're wrinkling my dress!" Then sweetly, "Maybe later, when I get home."

"That's what you said last night--later."

"What kind of animal are you, anyway? Every time I walk past you, you grab at me."

He lay back against the pillow. She jumped up and smoothed her skirt. Go on and go he thought. "I don't think about you any more, anyhow," he muttered.

She stood before the mirror arranging her lipstick, putting the cap back on the tube, she said matter-of-factly, "You're a liar." She grinned. "You think about me all of the time." Then she was gone.

He filled the tub with hot water, gave Chris stern instructions to play nicely in his room, and settled down to do calculus problems in his head while he relaxed in the tub. He had transferred the radio from the kitchen to the bedroom. He could hear the music of Lawrence Welk. Champagne rhythm welcoming hundreds of couples to the Aragon Ballroom for another summer evening of dancing. August 12, 1945.

After applying the coal-tar, he gave Chris a bath. The two then
climbed into bed together and listened to the radio in the dark.

Peter was awakened by sounds in the bathroom. He raised up on one elbow and peered at the clock. "Where in the hell have you been till this hour?"

She meekly replied, "It's only one o'clock. I stopped at Mary's for a beer. We've just been talking." She appeared in the doorway wrapped in a large bath towel.

"What?"

"I was at Mary's discussing the show."

He pushed Chris's fat behind to one side so that he could lie on his back and stretch his bony, six feet. He thought he must resemble Abe Lincoln in repose. "Show any good?"

Her voice was dreamy. "Van is always good."

"Huh."

"You're just jealous. Van Johnson is a clean, wholesome boy. You can't imagine how courteous he was to Esther Williams. No snatching or grabbing there."

"Hummm."

She pulled her yellow pajamas from a drawer. "Would you please put Chris in his own bed?"

Gently he lifted the droopy bundle and carried it to its own bedroom. When he returned, she was comfortably settled on her side of the bed. Careful," he cautioned. "Another half-inch and you'll fall out."

As he turned out the light, he added, "Maybe later when I get home."

"What?"

"I was merely quoting."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Goodnight."

"The hell you don't."

Silence.

He reached for her through the silence.

"Can't you ever just hold my hand or put your arm around me? Your knees hurt. They're sharp!"

"I love you."

Silence.

"You're desirable."

"Do you want a divorce?"

Sigh.

"I asked do you want a divorce?"

"I just want one good night's sleep without you pestering me. Please."

He turned away from her and flung one arm across his stinging eyes. It did no good to feel hurt or angry. He must divert himself, see
the funny side of it. See things through Van Johnson's clean, wholesome eyes.

He saw her languishing in a technicolored embrace. She was wearing an Esther Williams-endorsed bathing suit. Vermilion. Van climbed out of the pool and lay beside her on a beach towel of many colors.

Van placed his left hand politely on her right shoulder. Van's right hand rested lightly on her left hip. Van's boyish mouth pressed her lips lightly, respectfully.

Under Van's sky-blue bathing trunks (which matched his eyes), there beat an organ of pure gold. Van murmured smooth-skinned love words, and gypsy violins wailed erotically.

His flesh was firm. Eyes adoring. Hair curly. Intentions romantic. Sex sexless. Skin smooth. Complexion tan.

Nearby Van's butler readied a table with candlelight, wine, and of course he put a gardenia beside her plate. They were alone.

While every Tide-lover yearned to be crushed in Van's arms, while every Oxydol-doll swooned at the sight of Van's dimples, it was Peter's wife who walked into the sunset with this hugging hunk of ham. Thrill of a romance with no dirty socks under the bed, no shirts to scorch, and no skin to sweep into a dustpan tomorrow morning. THE END.

A cuckoo woke him up. It was 7 a.m. The radio had been on all night and the Wieboldt Lady was playing her Musical Clock signature: chimes and cuckoos, chimes and cuckoos.

Peter opened his eyes, inhaled the coal-tar unguent, and turned to his young wife. She was a lovely thing. He patted her arm gently and sighed, "Cuckoo is right." She slept on undisturbed.

Another summer day. The itching resumed, and the copper taste of pennies filled his mouth.