Lucky Penny

 “Rich Bitch is back.” Lou slurped the rest of his Bud and crinkled the can in his meaty fist. “Wonder where she’s been.”

 Mike laughed, “Probably on a cruise.” He finished his own beer and tossed it towards the recycling bin on the front porch. A dusty brown dog lumbered up the steps and settled with a huff.

 Sunday meant a day-off and Lou intended to enjoy it. Sitting with a good friend on his porch... drinking a few... relaxing. No worries. The sun was out on a fall day; the heat collected on the porch. The game was on later and hyped-up to be a good one. Brittany promised cheeseburgers at half-time.

 Both men watched as a thin woman clad in matching exercise wear strode purposefully down the street. Her arms swung from rigid shoulders. Expensive-looking sunglasses wrapped around her eyes. While passing the house, she didn’t glance at either of them. Their eyes followed her.

 “Skinny,” said Mike.

 “She probably doesn’t eat.”

 “Wish *my* wife wouldn’t eat.”

 “Yeah.” Lou nodded in agreement. “She’s pregnant again.” He cracked open another beer from the cooler and took a quick swallow of foam.

 “Who? Brittany? Thought you two were done.” Mike glanced at Lou from his cigarette-burned plastic patio chair. He fished out a Camel and clicked open a Zippo lighter. He inhaled and blew smoke out toward the dog, who sneezed.

 “Thought so too.”

 “Wasn’t she talking about going back to work?”

 “Yup. But now she wants to stay home with the kids. Three kids in daycare costs too much. Not worth it.” Lou picked up a naked Barbie from off the weather-beaten porch and tossed her into a kiddie pool filled with two inches of green water. She floated face-down; matted hair splayed about.

 “Lots to think about,” said Mike.

 “Yeah. Lots to worry about too.”

 “Sorry, man.”

 Both men sat in silence as the dog stretched out on the porch, wheezing as he exhaled.

 After a few minutes, Mike asked, “You fix the truck?”

 “Yup. Water pump. Still leaking some oil though.”

 Both men sipped their beers. The afternoon sun moved behind the trees, casting long shadows across the yard. A chill began. It was almost game time.

 A rabbit appeared in the yard. The dog raised his old head and bumbled off the porch in a half-hearted attempt to give chase. His legs wobbled as he jumped over a purple tricycle with broken wheels. This short-lived activity sapped his energy. The rabbit dove into the plastic kiddie pool and immediately launched himself out to escape under the shed. The dog howled in frustration.

#

 Jennifer Smith-Wilkinson walked with determination, head down. Her long strides enabled her to move quickly through the adjacent older neighborhood. Cars rested on blocks. Back yards memorialized dead appliances. Weeds tickled either side of gravel driveways. Lawns of rocky dirt rather than grass stretched behind rusted chain link fences. Jennifer’s forehead creased in disagreement.

 It was her first time leaving the house in a week. The hollow pain in her abdomen echoed with each step. Dr. Epstein said to take it easy. Easy to Jennifer meant a five-mile walk. She pumped her arms hard to take her mind off the stitches pulling at her skin. And the argument with her husband that morning.

 “I want to try again,” she had said over coffee. She sipped the freshly roasted brew and observed Justin for any telltale signs of agreement. His focus remained on the newspaper. He made a noise like *hmmm* as he swallowed his orange juice. Apparently financial markets were up.

 “Justin.”

 “What?”

 “I want to try again,” she repeated.

 Justin put down the paper and folded it into a neat pile. The morning sun beamed through crisply ironed curtains into the breakfast nook and highlighted his blond hair. His plate showed signs of pancakes and syrup. He crossed his arms over his faded grey Princeton t-shirt, his Sunday costume.

 “The doctor said it’s probably not a good idea,” he said.

 She searched for answers which would appease them both. None came. So, she silently relented. *No. No it’s not wise.* Three miscarriages and last week a D&C which turned into a laparoscopy to remove fibroids. *No, Justin, probably not wise at all...but…*

 Instead, she said, “This is the last time. I promise.”

 Jennifer didn’t mean it. And Justin knew she didn’t mean it. After ten years of marriage – couples know when the other lied. An unintended tilt of the head. A softer, tenuous voice. A fake itch to scratch.

 “Jennifer…”

 She gazed down into her favorite coffee mug. Chipped and discolored, it had lasted longer than the others, like a comfortable old friend. It didn’t match any of the dinnerware, either every day or special occasion. But she loved the size, the shape. It held just the right amount of coffee.

 She looked towards Justin, while trying not to meet his direct stare. “I know.”

 “This has been pretty rough on you. And me. Haven’t we had enough?”

 “You know I’ve always wanted a family.”

 “Aren’t *we* a family?”

 “We’re not enough. I want a child.” The back of her eyes tingled. Her bottom lip trembled.

 “Maybe we aren’t meant to have one.”

 Jennifer’s eyes suddenly pooled with tears. An automatic response to his perceived criticism. She took a napkin from the table and wiped.

 Now, hours later, beads of sweat collected on her forehead as she tried to sort things out on her daily walk. Plans, ideas, dreams. There was always another way. IVF. A surrogate. She’d call Dr. Epstein. Or find another specialist. She was still young.

 As Jennifer walked her standard route out of her own neighborhood and into the next, she met a stark comparison within mere feet. It always shocked. How could people live so differently? The run-down houses and busted lawn furniture reminded her, not for the first time, to thank God for her HOA. Rules were important. If people didn’t follow the rules, things got out of control. She continued walking briskly, thinking about her future.

#

 On Monday morning, Lou started the truck early to warm it up. A frost covered the patchy yard. He came back inside the house for his small Igloo cooler containing his lunch; his boots stomped on the mat.

 “Sorry, hon. It’s pb&j today,” Brittany said as she kissed him goodbye. “Put these in the mailbox, okay?” She handed him some bills, the mortgage payment to the bank on top.

 “We’re okay this month?” he asked.

 She nodded and kissed him again. He rumpled the kids’ hair which stuck up from sleep as they ate their cereal. The dog got a goodbye scratch behind the ears.

 He pulled out of the driveway and turned on the radio to Rock 105.5 just as a classic Aerosmith song came on. He glanced left for traffic from the new neighborhood. A large sign *Stone Valley Estates* welcomed its residents home. Big houses with velvety green yards no owner actually mowed. Foreign cars stowed safely in garages. Their kids wore clean clothes and played with new toys. Just a hundred feet away. A whole other life.

 *“Dream on... dream on...”*

 Lou reached forward to push in the cigarette lighter. He pulled out a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket and lit it. He looked down at his penny inside the cup holder. He flipped it around in his calloused fingers. An old Indian head. He’d found it as a kid; kept it for years.

 *“Dream until your dreams come true.”*

 Lou smiled half-heartedly. He stopped at the stop sign at the end of the street, made a wish, and flicked the penny out of the cracked-open window.

 The penny hit Jennifer, just as she turned the corner. She raised her hand to her forehead and stood motionless. Lou watched from the truck. She looked into his eyes through the windshield. Her lips set into a grim line.

 He rolled the truck window further down. “Sorry about that. You okay?”

 She nodded, rubbing her head. He gave her a little wave in apology. Then the truck’s tires rolled, coughed up gravel, and left a cloud of dust behind him.

 Jennifer mumbled, “Asshole.”

 At her feet lay a penny. She picked it up and blew on it. Just an old penny. She threw it back on the ground and continued walking. Like usual, her arms swung and legs pumped. Moving forward. Always moving forward. She’d convince Justin. She’d call Dr. Epstein. Make another appointment.