

T H E P E N N Y

By
Joyce Meyer and Deborah Bedford

CHAPTER 1

There are two things I will always remember about summers in St. Louis. One is walking barefoot on pavement so hot that I could pop the tar bubbles with my toes. Pavement so hot that, by the end of July, the hide on the soles of my feet was as thick as my tanned-leather coin purse from Woolworth's and I could cross Arsenal Street without having to run. Every year, some photographer from *The Post-Dispatch* would take a shot of an egg frying sunny-side-up on the sidewalk and the paper would run it on the front page. HOT ENOUGH TO FRY AN EGG ON THE SIDEWALK! the headline would bellow. As if they were telling us something we didn't already know.

The other thing I'll always remember is the summer of the penny. At this point in my life, I'm picking up pennies all the time. But that wasn't the case back then. Not before *the* penny, the *important* penny, the one that led me to Miss Shaw at the jewelry store.

That's my theory of my life, if I think about it. How big decisions sometimes don't amount to much. How paying attention to the little things can sometimes transform everything. Because the penny led me to knowing Miss Shaw, and knowing Miss Shaw was what started things changing between Daddy and Jean and Mama and me.

Before the penny, if you'd have asked what I knew about Miss Shaw, I'd have shrugged and acted like you were loony. "I don't know *anything* about her," I would've told you, because girls like me had no reason to speak with ladies like Miss Shaw.

No one in the neighborhood knew much about Miss Shaw. For, although my one friend Marianne Thompson and I had seen her greet her customers with a warm smile like she could tell something special about them, a girl like me never had any reason to set foot inside a jewelry store. So Marianne and I just wondered among ourselves, did she come from money, or did she earn it? Did she grow up around here? How old was she? Why didn't she get wet hair on a rainy day? And because of that, because no one knew where she'd come from or who her parents were or how she'd come to buy her own jewelry store, she was the most profound mystery along Grand Avenue. And you know how everybody likes to talk about a mystery.

"Now there's a woman up to no good," Daddy would comment whenever she happened to see Miss Shaw promenading along the sidewalk downtown with her pocketbook tucked beneath her arm. Daddy had a general distrust for all things to do with women bettering themselves. He had a healthy contempt for Miss Shaw in particular. "That woman causes all the talk, anyway. She *thrives* on being talked about or else she

wouldn't stay tight-mouthed the way she does. Let me tell you, there's a woman who rides a high horse. Acting like the rest of us aren't good enough to know her."

Only one part of the neighborhood hearsay going around about Miss Shaw didn't match up with the stories of Miss Shaw's grace, beauty and superiority. Marianne Thompson made a vow to me once that she'd seen Miss Shaw sneaking around in the shadows of the town cemetery. She'd been hiding behind trees, Marianne insisted, and taking careful steps through the fallen leaves so as not to make any sound with her high-heeled shoes, and glancing around stealthily to make certain nobody saw her. She'd been looking around for a grave, Marianne insisted, and when she found the one she was looking for, it didn't have a stone. Marianne had seen Miss Shaw stoop to the ground and wipe the dead leaves from a smooth patch of dirt and place her gloved hand atop the dry mound. She held her hand to the ground for the longest time, Marianne declared, like she expected to feel a heartbeat.

These are the things I knew for sure about Miss Shaw from my own observance. She arrived at Shaw's Jewelers before nine every morning, leaving plenty of time to polish the counters and arrange the pearls on the headless necks in the window before the store opened. She wore pumps that reminded me of the ones I'd seen when Mama took me to the A&P Supermarket once, the pretend princess shoes you could buy on the toy aisle, with plastic jewels across the toes and bottoms so stiff and curved that they arched your feet like a ballerina *en pointe*.

Every time I saw her, I wanted to stare, seeing how she held herself. To this day, I'll bet Miss Shaw practiced balancing books on her head while she walked around her house in those beautiful shoes.

And this one last important thing I knew about her. No one ever saw Miss Opal Shaw without her white Sunday gloves on, tiny buttons fastened against the soft underside of her wrists. She wore her gloves no matter if she was counting inky receipts or down-shifting her Studebaker or presenting diamonds to a customer.

What *you* have to know is this. South St. Louis is not a place you'd want to wear white Sunday gloves on any other day of the week.

But I'd best get back to the penny.

I discovered Grace Kelly movies that summer, mostly because the Fox Theatre had refrigerated air. The sign proclaimed in frozen-painted letters, AIR COOLED, with white 'x'es to look like sparkles and icicles hanging from the A and the C. The Fox was so fancy that, after you paid at the box office, you got to pick any one of a dozen gleaming doors.

My big sister's temper matched the heat that July. Jean paced the house, as restless as the lynx that prowled its cage at the zoo, and about as moody, too. You could almost see the room get darker when she entered the door.

Jean, almost four years my senior, had graduated early. There wasn't a fourth grade one year so the school board made it up by dividing the smart third graders from the ones who weren't so well off in that department. She acted like she'd won a Nobel Prize or something, when all she'd done was show up and go where they told her. Still, if I'd been in that class, they would have left me in the third grade and Jean knew it. She bragged about moving up all the time. I guess I understood why. Sometimes, to survive Daddy's meanness, we got along best by acting big for our britches.

Jean's secretarial school would start in two months. Mama had started making off-handed suggestions about Jean taking me for an outing lately. 'You go off to be a secretary soon, Jean, you won't have time left to pal around with your sister,' Mama would say as carefully as if she were tiptoeing on shattered glass. Even with that, Jean would ignore me. She would slouch in the chair by the window and stare out the window with her arms crossed, a tragic yet slightly comic *Jane Eyre*.

I guess me and my sister got along the way most sisters do. I always felt like I was living in her shadow. She told me later how it bothered her I was always nipping at her heels. I told her she was wrong, I was just always trying to catch up with her. And she said, *There were some things you didn't want to catch up with me on, didn't you see?*

We lived upstairs in a two-story flat on Wyoming Street, in a neighborhood where the buildings had been wedged much too close together. What had started as red brick, weathered and coated with coal soot, was now the color of brown rust. When the hot air rose, our rooms soaked up heat like an oven. The flat belonged to Daddy and we could have lived downstairs if he'd wanted, but he reminded Mama every time she asked that he could get higher rent by keeping the paying tenants in the cooler rooms downstairs.

On the day of the penny, Jean had gone into another brood because Adele Middleton had invited her to spend the night with her family in an air-cooled room at the Ambassador Hotel but, as usual, Daddy had told her no. Daddy always said no to everything. Just because he was always miserable--I don't know why he thought he had to spread that around to the rest of us, too.

Even when my sister was brooding, Jean was everything I wasn't, tall and willowy, with light brown hair and hazel eyes that flashed a hint of green. My hair looked like a fistful of corkgrass when I wrestled it into a pony tail. Jean's hung straight down her back, as smooth as ribbon.

When she asked, "Why can't I go?" fear twisted in my throat the same way it did whenever Jean pushed it with him. Daddy would never change. And my sister seemed destined to be the one most willing to provoke his anger. I wanted to grab her and make her be quiet. "Why not?"

My sister and I were many things to each other; sidekicks, rivals, accomplices, enemies. Some days we became an undecipherable muddle of all four. When I watched Jean stand up to Daddy, her bravery left me both aching with dread and reeling with love. I wanted to murder her for being so dim.

"You talk back to me, girl, I'll knock you across the room."

"Jean." I picked up the goldfish bowl from the coffee table. "Don't." I already knew it wouldn't help at all to go find Mama.

But Jean was too fiery for her own good. "You never let us do *anything*."

And just like that, Daddy grabbed her by the hair and landed a stinging smack across her face. She staggered over the coffee table. She tried to shield herself with her left arm, but Daddy's punch to the stomach sent her sprawling to the floor. She landed hard on her rear. When she lifted her eyes to him, he said, "We don't got money for places like the Ambassador Hotel and you know it. You stop wanting what you can't pay for."

Jean stared up at Daddy in hatred. I knew what she must be thinking by the flash in her eyes. *Well, of course we've got money. You spend money all the time.*

It was an invitation, I wanted to cry to him, only I didn't dare. When people invite you for something, they don't intend for you to pay.

The window fan did nothing but move the stifling air from one spot to another. Since the heat began, hardly any cars or people had been in sight, not even in Tower Grove Park. Sirens wailed out in the street. And Daddy kept right on going. "I'll knock you down every time you glare at me like that. You hear me?"

It might have been the wrong thing to think, but I kept wondering if anything would come along that would knock *him* down.

"Come on." Jean clutched my hand so tight that the knobs of my knuckles crunched against each other. "Might not have enough for the Ambassador but we *do* have enough for a picture show, Jenny." I knew she was using me to shield herself against Daddy, which terrified me and made me feel a little important all at the same time. I felt important because I was helping Jean. I was frightened because Daddy could just as well beat me up next. "*Rear Window* is on."

I tugged on Jean's arm and tried to make her look at me, but she wouldn't. If she met my eyes, either one of us might have to admit that Daddy scared us. Nobody wanted to do that. It was safer to keep our minds filled with notions of Grace Kelly and Jimmy Stewart; we'd seen *Rear Window* twice already.

And you won't be able to take your eyes off her glowing beauty, the trailer touted with bated breath. I'd seen it so many times, I had the words memorized. "She shares the heart and curiosity of James Stewart in this story of romance shadowed by the terror of a horrifying secret."

The delicate, sophisticated actress on safari with Clark Gable, the pioneer bride who protected Gary Cooper in a shootout, didn't seem all that remarkable to me. But the movies she played in, stories of girls-winning-out, pulled at my insides like the moon tugs at the Mississippi.

It was Jean who copied everything about Grace Kelly, from the hair she pulled into the shape of a dinner roll at the nape of her neck, to the dark glasses that made her glamorous and mysterious at the same time, to the scarf she wore, as billowy as a spring cloud, knotted beneath her chin. Jean drove me crazy, seeing how she let thoughts of Grace Kelly dominate her life. Sometimes I thought I'd go nuts if she didn't stop talking about how Mr. Kelly's nickname for his daughter was Graciebird or how her first commercial featured her spraying a can of insecticide around the room or how, at the beginning, most directors she auditioned for found her too tall. I was sick to death of hearing the story of how, when Grace had been a teenager, she'd stood on the front seat in a convertible and had driven the car with her feet.

I was scrounging through my handbag looking for my coin purse, thinking how my sister drove me mad because she couldn't talk about anything besides Grace Kelly, when Jean came and dragged me down the narrow staircase. "Streetcar's coming," she said as I squinted against aching splinters of light, but she needn't have told me. The warning bell clanged as the door accordioned open, and Jean shoved me up. We lurched to the rear to buy tickets and fell into warm, hard seats. My sister crossed her legs at the knees, shoved her sunglasses up over her forehead and drew out a tube of Pond's *Ever-So-Red* lipstick. She drew a neat circle around her mouth and blotted. When she snapped open her pocketbook to return the lipstick, I caught the beginning of what Jean's grown-

up smell would be, a mixture of powder and faint-scented tissue and *Emeraude* cologne. The sweetness left my head aching and my stomach woozy.

When the trolley stopped in front of Woolworth's and we got off, Jean hurried across the street ahead of me to join the ticket line. Even from this distance, I could see the angry red handprint Daddy left on her cheek. She was getting away from us. I couldn't breathe when I thought about Jean getting out of the house, going on to secretarial school.

"What are you starting at?" She plopped her hands on her hips. "Come on."

Often when we were by ourselves at home, when Daddy was gone, when Mama was outside and I'd be aching to share confidences with my sister, I'd catch Jean staring at me like she regretted knowing me. Maybe she didn't much like the idea that, due to the inopportune occurrence of my birth, she was tied to me for life. At times she almost seemed okay with having a sister. At other times, she made it plain she didn't like who her sister *was*. I couldn't do much to make it change other than wish she'd try to see me different. Jean's moods may have been a bother, I thought as I stood in the street outside the Fox Theater, but I wanted to stay on her good side. She was all I had.

That's when streetcar clanged its bell and pulled away behind us.

That's the very moment I first saw the penny. And that's the moment where this story really begins.

The penny laid wheat-side-up on the ground, so dirty as to almost be invisible. Like I said, I wasn't accustomed to picking up pennies at that point. A penny's never been worth much, it's such a little thing. I stared at it, stepped over it, and headed toward my sister waiting outside the theater.

Then the noise of Grand Avenue went silent. *Go back*, something inside me insisted. *Don't miss the chance*.

To this day I have to wonder, if I'd knelt to the ground and grabbed the penny the first time around without stopping to think, if Jean hadn't turned toward me from the box office to holler, if she hadn't bossed me, "Okay, Jenny. Jenny, come on, *don't*. That's disgusting picking things up in the street. You're washing your hands before you're getting anything from the snack bar," if everything would have happened the same.

But I *did* walk past the penny at first. Then when something whispered, *Pick it up, Jenny*, my heart almost paused in my chest. And I knew it without a doubt. As surely as if someone well trusted had whispered it in my ear.

This moment has something to do with your destiny.

It was only a matter of seconds before I went back. Seconds, I would find out later, that would change everything. I often wonder, to this day, how that day might have turned out different if I'd stepped over the penny and ignored it and just kept right on going.

The copper had melted its way clear into the asphalt. I bent over--I remember it even to this day--and used my fingernails to pry the hot coin out of the roadbed. I remember straightening, the penny branding my palm in the middle of Grand Avenue. And that's when the mystifying chain of events began.

It started simple enough. It started when the Pevely Dairy truck braked to keep from hitting me, which sent bottles, full and empty both, toppling sideways. A dozen or so dashed to the street and shattered with sharp cracks.

Glass flew. Daisies of milk splattered on the street. The door at the five-and-dime opened and a woman lugging her baby in a car bed stepped outside just as the last three bottles fell. "Oh my word," the woman said, swinging the basket toward the building, shielding her child from what must have sounded like the Attack of the Killer Shards from Space. When she swung, she blindsided Bennett Mahaffey, who happened to be headed home with his favorite copy of Elvis Presley's *That's All Right Mama* tucked beneath his arm.

The blow struck Bennett hard enough to knock the LP from its jacket. When the disk hit the sidewalk, it wobbled on its edge and headed downhill toward everybody waiting in line at the Fox box office.

Bennett took off after his record.

He wasn't running exactly, because you can't run after something that's doing the platter thing--rolling in a complete circle, then a smaller circle, until it starts to clatter to the ground. He loped after it with his arms widespread and his knees bent, making a tentative grab every time it came close, as if *That's All Right Mama* could actually go wheeling around like that and not get a scratch on it.

Now here's something about Miss Shaw that I didn't know; I didn't find it out until much later. Each Wednesday just after five in the evening, no matter whether it was snowing in St. Louis or blowing up a gale or hot as a skillet, Miss Shaw rearranged her display windows. Shaw Jewelers stood two doors to the north of the theatre, its front door shaded by a green awning with silver letters, its scalloped edges lifting in the slight event of a breeze. Anyone who cared to watch could see her gloved hands working, removing a necklace here, a bracelet there, angling a set of earbobs, pushing a ring closer to the center.

Miss Shaw worked dutifully for some length of time, arranging gems, aligning chains, matching colors. Occasionally she would step out to gaze at the displays herself, tilting her head, assessing her artistry. Each time Miss Shaw stepped outside, she carried a polish rag in her pocket and necklaces draped across her gloves, often glancing to see if one of them would make the display more appealing.

On this particular day, Pete Mason happened to see Miss Shaw eyeing her windows from where he sat on a bench across the street. Indeed, he would say later, he had watched everything, the dairy truck, the swinging of the car bed, the crowd buying tickets for the picture show. He watched the stranger step off the curb, making a beeline for Miss Shaw. He watched the planned sleight of hand, the lifting of the necklaces from Miss Shaw's glove, and the bolting for cover into the box-office crowd. "Hey!" Miss Shaw cried, too surprised for anything else.

That's how it happened that Pete Mason went into the crowd after the thief. That's how it happened that Bennett Mahaffey, who delivered appliances after school for Stix, Bauer and Fuller and who was the size of a small ice box himself, made a successful grab for his LP just as the fleeing looter, glancing back to gauge Pete's distance, tripped over Bennett instead. Bennett let out an oomph of breath that sounded like a tire going flat. The looter somersaulted to the ground. Miss Shaw raced toward the Fox box office in her slender-heeled pumps. The man behind the window shouted, "Any more for *Rear Window*?"

"These yours?" Pete scooped up necklaces from where they'd flown to the sidewalk. He wiped them off with his monogrammed hanky.

“They are.” Miss Shaw held out a gloved hand. “Thank you so much.” It all happened in front of me, unfolding like a dream you talk about, where nothing’s tied together but, in the end, the pieces make sense some way.

“Did you see that?” I ran to my sister’s side, knowing she must have noticed something.

“What?”

“The truck.” I pointed in the direction of the shattered bottles in the street. “Miss Shaw and her necklaces.” I pointed in the opposite direction toward the green awning. I closed my fingers over the penny, which had cooled in my hand. *A moment to define my destiny.* That’s when I saw Pete Mason nod his head toward me. Miss Shaw glanced in my direction and shot a warm, curious smile.

“Jenny Blake,” Jean ordered, having missed the whole thing, “if you don’t come on, we’re going to miss the newsreels again.” She sounded just as dour as always.