

The Coin

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When the surgeon's scalpel opened Greta's old heart, to everyone's surprise, there was a coin inside her right atrium, the chamber that receives blood from the body and then propels it toward the lungs for cleansing.

"Jesus, will you look at this," he breathed into his blue paper surgical mask. Poking at the coin with the tip of his scalpel, he realized it was unattached, that it likely flopped around or spun when the blood flow came rushing through the heart's chamber.

"Tissue forceps," he said, and the nurse at his right elbow slapped a long thin silver tweezer-like instrument in his hand, which was covered in tight pale ivory rubber gloving. He plunked the coin on the sterile cloths surrounding the exposed hole in Greta's chest. The coin was black. The surgeon couldn't tell much about it as he stared at it. He thought it looked like an American penny.

When Greta heard about the coin she wanted to see it, to hold it in her hand. The surgeon told her the lab had to have a look at it first, and then he would bring it to her. "It looks like an American penny," he said to her while she was sipping her morning tea the day after the operation. "Any idea how it got there? I've never seen anything like it in thirty years of practice. I'm stymied." Greta smiled. This was much more exciting than anything she could have dreamed of happening to her.

The coin was gold, Roman, 79 A.D. According to the historian at the museum, it was rare, valuable, unusual. Greta held it, now polished and gleaming, in her right hand, and put on her glasses with her left hand. Then she gazed at the profile of a man with a long nose and a cap of curls on his head. His eyes gazed slightly upward, as if he were saying hello to someone who had just entered the room. She decided she loved this man, that this was the best man she'd ever been involved with. When her daughter visited her later that day she asked her to buy her the strongest magnifying glass she could find. And, grinning, she stuffed a \$100.00 bill in her hand. Her daughter was speechless. Mother was typically dour. Tight with her bucks. Practical. Certainly not one to examine or reflect on anything more complicated than the hem of a skirt that needed mending. Still, the daughter bought the magnifying glass and changed the bulb in the gooseneck lamp by her mother's chair so it was ready for her when she came home from the hospital.

Greta found a piece of plush deep green velvet in her sewing box and spread it on the lapboard that straddled her easy chair's arms. She put the coin on the cloth, turned on the gooseneck lamp and got out the magnifying glass. She licked her lips and took a deep breath. Then she opened her eyes as wide as she could and peered down at the golden moon on her lap. Her man in the moon was ... gorgeous. She took a toothpick and gently touched his nose, his chin, his left eyebrow. Deep inside her belly, her innards stirred, a low musical note she'd not felt in more years than she could count. Taking the coin between her fingers she rubbed it gently on her cheeks and her eyelids and she dragged it

slowly across her lips. Then she put her fingertips ever so lightly on the sides of her neck and face. As she did, she realized she was flushed, and a slow smile crept into her eyes. “Well, here we are,” she said out loud. Watching from the doorway, her daughter was stunned by her mother’s behaviour.

Over the next month Greta spent most of her waking hours either looking at the coin or walking in the fresh bluish autumn air, the coin in a tiny velvet sack she had sewn to wear around her neck. On her walks she stooped to pick up newly sprung chestnuts, their chocolately skin as soft and unblemished as new penny loafers, and she tucked them in her shirt pocket close to her man. Her heart was healing well, the cardiologist told her. As long as she was steady about her exercise and paid attention to her rest, she’d likely live five or ten more years. “Perhaps,” she answered, a question mark lurking in the corner of her mouth.

When her daughter discovered Greta dead in her bed the last Saturday in October, she was very surprised. Mother had been fine, in fact more spirited and healthy than in years. How could she be dead? Against the lace pillowslip, Greta’s face was smooth with peace and knowing. Her hands were folded over her chest and in her laced fingers was the small velvet pouch with the coin. Beside her bed was a letter, a ten-page letter, written in Latin.