

High School Short Story Third Place

Melinda Believing

By Esme Pickel, Richard Montgomery High School

Melinda had despised spiders up until she was 5 years old. They were always creeping, crawling, spinning webs that you could be tangled up in, and perhaps one day, you would be tangled up forever, never to see the light of day again. It was for this reason that Melinda detested going into her closet, where cobwebs and spiderwebs alike lay in the uppermost reaches of the corner, silently spying on her as she would anxiously retrieve her clothes from the hangers and drawers. Spiders frightened her so much that she made her parents move her bed to the side of the room opposite the closet. This effort was made to delay the attack of the spiders that was bound to happen sooner or later.

It was on a cold winter's morning when Melinda first saw a penny in her closet. She had gotten up from bed, and had gone to get her clothes from the closet as usual, when in a dark corner, she spotted a shiny object, which she identified as a penny. Melinda's first thought was to grab the penny, which she did, because, being 5 years old, Melinda had poor impulse control. She examined the penny, and suddenly realized that she had money. She gazed at it with awe, and decided to keep it, because no one else was claiming it.

She dressed, pocketed the penny, and then walked to the kitchen for breakfast. When it came time to go to school, Melinda took a previously neglected purse that a family friend had given her and put the penny there. She showed off the penny to practically everyone she met, and by the end of the day, she had become extremely proud of her little copper gem. That night, she rested her purse with the coin still in it on her night table, and lay in bed for a long while, thinking. For the first time that day, she considered where the penny might have come from.

Might it have been there all along and she had only noticed it that day? Or did someone put it there? If so, who would come into her bedroom to put a penny on her closet floor? Eventually, Melinda fell into a drowsy sleep full of her unanswered questions. The next day, she sprang to her feet, and eagerly ran to her closet in hope of finding another penny, due to unknown logic. As she flung the door open, her expression changed drastically, finding no copper glint on the ground.

She searched for a time, but then, dismayed, resolved that there had only been one penny after all. At first, Melinda was disappointed and melancholy, but she soon forgot her worries, and was satisfied with her solitary penny. The next day, she did not impatiently throw wide her closet door, but warily cracked it open to watch for dangerous spiders. Sighing in relief that none sprang forward, she pulled the door wider, to discover that another penny was on her closet floor! She dived for the penny, overjoyed that she could have such fortune, and while gazing at the penny, saw a spider in front of her that seemed to be watching her.

Quickly, she drew away, but then stopped and analyzed the situation. The closet contained both wonderful pennies, but also dangerous spiders (bypassing the usual appearance of clothes). Could it be that the pennies were some sort of a peace offering? She gazed in wonder at the spider, and suddenly, it didn't look as menacing as it had before.

"Spiders, I thank you for your peace offerings, and I humbly accept them. I will do my best to care for you as well," Melinda declared, and then set off to do them well.

First, Melinda asked her parents to move her bed closer to the closet, in order to show trust for the spiders. She then volunteered to clean her room herself, so that she could leave the spiderwebs in peace, and clean out the old cobwebs. And so went the life of Melinda, and for many years, she received pennies from the spiders, in return for her works of goodwill towards them. After she returned from a vacation, many pennies would be on the floor of her closet, for most of the days she had gone. Gradually, though, the pennies slowed their flow to only every other day, and then to one for every week. Soon, every fortnight a penny would be found, and then every month, until eventually no pennies could be found on Melinda's closet floor.

This didn't stop Melinda from caring for the spiders, however. She continued to take care of their webs and even started researching what spiders ate, what the right conditions for them were, and anything that had the slightest thing to do with caring for spiders. As she came across more and more articles on spiders, she found that people who study spiders are called arachnologists. She immediately decided that she would become an arachnologist. Melinda became more interested in her biology class at school, and would often stay after class to pose her questions to her teacher.

Before long, Melinda's life was full of reading articles on spiders and journals of arachnology, watching documentaries on spiders, and latching onto anything else related to spiders. Once she entered high school, Melinda founded an arachnology club, which though it had only three to four members at any time, was a dedicated team of budding arachnologists. Unfortunately, it was here that all three to four of the students realized that arachnology was not a field with many career opportunities. And so, though she despaired, Melinda decided to continue her work through the field of zoology instead. She continued her work in high school, and remained dedicated to solving the mysteries of the spiders of her closet and around the world.

Within what seemed like the blink of an eye, Melinda had graduated high school, and was off to college, to study zoology. She got a dormitory room with a roommate and so was moving out of her childhood bedroom. She transported her bed and desk, and had sold or given away everything else, so that now her room was bare and empty. She then packed all of her clothes and other closet things in suitcases and boxes, so that her parents could use her old room for a study. As a last act, Melinda removed the spiders from her closet and gave them new homes in the furthest corner of the attic, behind some skis and other winter gear, where they would be safe from her parents' cleaning.

And just like that, Melinda's room became simply a shell, though she could see her life in the little marks around her room. She meandered over to the wall where her parents had measured her height every year. She touched the marks on the wall that had been made by moving her desk around. She looked out the window where, when sick, she had watched as all of her friends played. And then she came to the closet, slowly turned the door's handle, and sentimentally beamed upon the place where first she had found her love for spiders. She sat on the floor, half-imagining that another penny would appear, and looked into the walls for reassurance that no such thing would happen.

Suddenly, Melinda gasped. There was a glint of copper in a crack in the wall. Melinda tried to reach for it, but realized that her attempts were futile, because the gap was too small to breach. She was persistent, though, and soon got her parents interested in the mystery of the chink in the wall. All three of them clambered into the iota of a space, and peered into the slit. Melinda pounded on the wall with an old, worn hammer, and progressively, the gap appeared larger, and kept getting larger until suddenly, with a final hit of the hammer, hundreds of pennies spilled onto Melinda's lap.

"Oh! I forgot, that's where we put our time capsule!" recounted Melinda's mom.

"Yeah, we filled it with tons of pennies, I think, in case we were broke one day." remembered her father.

Melinda was shocked. Her whole life's work had been based on a simple misunderstanding linking spiders and a forgotten time capsule. For a minute, she sat quietly while her parents recalled the days when the addition of Melinda's room had been built. After a bit, her parents realized her lack of attention, and were concerned.

"Melinda, dear, are you all right?" her mother anxiously queried.

Her father got up. "Should I get you a glass of water?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks though." And Melinda smiled fondly at the wall, and left her house, to go to college and study zoology.