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The Year of the Zinc Penny

By Rick DeMarinis

Norton

To those of us whose more benign childhood pursuits included coin collecting, their memory returns like a forgotten third-grade friend. We could never get them shiny and handsome. They lay in dull isolation, different, unable to quite fit in. But we liked them. Some of us even identified with them, those zinc pennies pressed in 1943. They were our link with recent history, emblemizing a period of heroism and fear and national resolve when time was more out of joint than we could grasp in our suburban post-war security.

They symbolize too the best year to meet Trygve Napoli, the ten year-old narrator of Rick DeMarinis's endearing comic novel.

At six, Trygve was relocated by his parents' divorce from his native New York City Italian culture to the bleak chill of snowy Montana, made far colder by the remote grandparents with whom he was interned for the next four years. His grandfather was a disabled railroad man whom Trygve tells us "never spoke to me or to anyone else," a stolid Norwegian who cannot pronounce the boy's last name. When the disoriented six year-old begins bed-wetting, Trygve's grandmother solves the problem with electric sheets: "I shocked myself awake so many times I began to fear sleep. I'd lie awake for hours, inventing another life for myself."

At ten, the boy gets another life. A reprieve comes in the form of news that Trygve's mother has remarried and wants him to join her in Los Angeles. At the train station, she cannot recognize her son, nor does he know this "radiant blond stranger" who "had a Norwegian fatalism, tough enough to outlast winter." But the three days of traveling toward her were the first in years when Trygve "forgot to be afraid."

Los Angeles, however, presents its own problems. Trygve's mother lives with her new husband, a draft-evading aspiring actor named Mitchell Selfage; Trygve's fragile and abstruse Aunt Ginger; Uncle Gerald, a Canadian seaman on frequent leaves and binges whom we first meet punching a motorcycle cop in the face; and Gerald's 15 year-old son, William, whose tough-guy manner will ensure that fear remains an element of Trygve's world.

Living in this crowded apartment whose landlord allows no children, pets or Jews, yet accepting all behavior except his own as normal, Trygve finds little in his new world that offers hope of security. His mother, he remembers, is a "disappearing woman," his uncle beats his aunt, and his stepfather thinks him "obscene" because even his walk lacks grace and forces Trygve to practice gliding around the apartment on the balls of his feet. At school the oddly named boy is immediately ostracized, and his crush on a pretty

classmate is rewarded with a coded note she passes him in class which, when he takes it home and decodes it, reads: "YOU SMELL LIKE PEE, TAKE A BATH."

He develops a romantic awe of those he feels wear a "marked for death" look, listens constantly on his short-wave radio to news of the war, and escapes into Walter Mittyish fantasies where he is a war hero with a WASPy name who is invariably dying in the arms of a beautiful woman. Yet he cannot press even these fantasies too far, as thoughts of death lead to thoughts of Heaven which Trygve considers "a vague place, too clean and white to be very interesting. What could you possibly do in a place like that where the centuries ticked by like seconds? The potential for boredom was mind boggling."

The only place Trygve ever seems at peace, able to fit in, is the pediatric ward of the hospital with other misfit children. One friend he meets there, a girl named Hildy, dies of leukemia. Her death leads Trygve to the brink of adolescent existentialism: "The Supreme Being was old, too old to keep himself interested in us. Watching over us all through history had made him sleepy and bored. What else could account for the state of the world?"

By the end of his dream-like year in Los Angeles, Trygve is still, like the zinc penny, different, unable to fit in, an outsider in his own family. Yet, he has grown in understanding and learned new strategies for coping with a world that offers no sure foothold.

The Year of the Zinc Penny belongs to that long line of American novels--including *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Separate Peace*, *The Catcher in the Rye*--that depict a boy taking his early, uncertain steps into manhood. Rick DeMarinis, 1986 winner of the Drue Heinz Prize for short fiction and author of a story which will appear next month in *Best American Short Stories 1989*, gives us a warm coming-of-age tale fit to stand beside the best in the genre.

In Trygve Napoli, DeMarinis creates a vulnerable yet compassionate boy forced to slalom through a world of personal cruelty and global death, where even those who seem to care cannot be counted on to care tomorrow. Trygve grows, less because he wishes to than because he must. As we follow him through a succession of trials ranging from terrifying to darkly comic, we find that in the capricious world of 1943 that seems to offer him little understanding or affection, we have come to understand and to care about him a great deal.