

# Pennies

**Background:** The nice thing about writing songs is being able to embellish reality to create a story. The song ends up not exactly factual, but not pure fiction either, just the truth stretched a bit. Springsteen is a master of it. He made a tiny boardwalk in the average beach town of Asbury Park seem like the Vegas strip with a set of real-life characters emulating West Side Story on a daily basis. None of it is untrue, probably, at least not in his recollection, but it's not entirely real either. Taking on the full perspective of someone else is wild too. Hell, Bruce once wrote a song where serial killer Charles Starkweather is the narrator!

Everything in this song is true, just a bit stretched and embellished.

This is a song themed around pennies, but it's about various aspects and perspectives of growing up. Some of it is true, some pure cliché, and some exaggeration, all leading up to the story of a young classmate who passed away, which is true save for her name.

In second grade, a classmate developed brain cancer. She left our class, had brain surgery, and came back a while later to visit us wearing a ski cap to cover her shaven head and bandages. She never fully returned to school. Despite the surgery, she died in April that year shortly after my birthday. She was 7. She just...disappeared. Her name was Tina, not Penny, but, well, "Tina" didn't rhyme nor fit the theme of the song. It was hard to understand something so tragic like this when we were so young. It's even harder now as a parent. But I remember the funeral, and in particular the very odd, uplifting, cheery song they strangely chose for the entrance to a child's funeral. It's been 47 years, and she still crosses my mind once in a while for no reason. It's strange to think that she still lives on in the memories of people this long afterwards and not directly connected with her family, and that they don't even know this. Outside of her family, she's lost in time. Or is she?

And of course there's a train in this song. I like trains, as do most songwriters given how often they show up in songs. They make for a great metaphor and also contain a bit of lost Americana nostalgia. "Sleepers" are the small wooden cross beams laid atop the gravel beneath the rails to allow the train load to distribute to a wider area; they ultimately are what supports the train. It's not always obvious as to who or what is really carrying a burden.

**Written:** 2023

**Verse**

A penny for your thoughts  
That's all I can afford today  
I know you can't be bought  
But it's a small price to pay  
You know the old cliches  
And all the lessons learned  
For every penny saved  
You spend many pennies earned

**Verse**

We used to pitch pennies  
In the grade school halls  
Until the teachers caught us  
Their shouts echoed off the walls  
Summers we'd go to this coal town  
It was mostly blue collar  
They had penny candy stores  
Fill up a bag for a dollar

**Chorus**

Pennies that we pinched  
Pennies we picked up  
We worked all day  
Still felt so outta luck  
Spinning in circles  
Falling off the ground  
You wanna cut your losses  
But you're in for the pound

**Verse**

We grew up on the east side  
Just below the tracks  
They split the city  
You could feel the cracks  
We put pennies on the rails  
Right in the train's route  
Then watch the train pass by  
Flatten those pennies out

**Chorus**

Pennies on the tracks  
Hidden in the grooves  
Slipping through the cracks  
Lost as she moves  
Pennies on the tracks  
Along the rails she rode  
The burden's on her back  
But sleepers carry the load

**Bridge**

Her nickname was Penny  
Short for Penelope Rayne  
She died of brain cancer  
In just the second grade  
At the time it was too much  
For us kids to comprehend  
But I remember that funeral song  
And the smell of burning incense

**Chorus**

Penny went to Heaven  
Enter, Rejoice and Come In  
She was only 7  
Life had yet to begin  
Pennies fell from Heaven  
Falling like the spring rain  
She never had a childhood  
But she's out of pain