



## Tania Luna: How a penny made me feel like a millionaire

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I'm five years old, and I am very proud. My father has just built the best outhouse in our little village in Ukraine. Inside, it's a smelly, gaping hole in the ground, but outside, it's pearly white formica and it literally gleams in the sun. This makes me feel so proud, so important, that I appoint myself the leader of my little group of friends and I devise missions for us. So we prowl from house to house looking for flies captured in spider webs and we set them free.

Four years earlier, when I was one, after the Chernobyl accident, the rain came down black, and my sister's hair fell out in clumps, and I spent nine months in the hospital. There were no visitors allowed, so my mother bribed a hospital worker. She acquired a nurse's uniform, and she snuck in every night to sit by my side. Five years later, an unexpected silver lining. Thanks to Chernobyl, we get asylum in the U.S.

I am six years old, and I don't cry when we leave home and we come to America, because I expect it to be a place filled with rare and wonderful things like bananas and chocolate and Bazooka bubble gum, Bazooka bubble gum with the little cartoon wrappers inside, Bazooka that we'd get once a year in Ukraine and we'd have to chew one piece for an entire week.

So the first day we get to New York, my grandmother and I find a penny in the floor of the homeless shelter that my family's staying in. Only, we don't know that it's a homeless shelter. We think that it's a hotel, a hotel with lots of rats. So we find this penny kind of fossilized in the floor, and we think that a very wealthy man must have left it there because regular people don't just lose money. And I hold this penny in the palm of my hand, and it's sticky and rusty, but it feels like I'm holding a fortune. I decide that I'm going to get my very own piece of Bazooka bubble gum. And in that moment, I feel like a millionaire.

About a year later, I get to feel that way again when we find a bag full of stuffed animals in the trash, and suddenly I have more toys than I've ever had in my whole life.

And again, I get that feeling when we get a knock on the door of our apartment in Brooklyn, and my sister and I find a deliveryman with a box of pizza that we didn't order. So we take the pizza, our very first pizza, and we devour slice after slice as the deliveryman stands there and stares at us from the doorway. And he tells us to pay, but we don't speak English. My mother comes out, and he asks her for money, but she doesn't have enough. She walks 50 blocks to and from work every day just to avoid spending money on bus fare. Then our neighbor pops her head in, and she turns red with rage when she realizes that those immigrants from downstairs have somehow gotten their hands on her pizza. Everyone's upset. But the pizza is delicious.

It doesn't hit me until years later just how little we had. On our 10 year anniversary of being in the U.S., we decided to celebrate by reserving a room at the hotel that we first stayed in when we got to the U.S. The man at the

front desk laughs, and he says, "You can't reserve a room here. This is a homeless shelter." And we were shocked.

My husband Brian was also homeless as a kid. His family lost everything, and at age 11, he had to live in motels with his dad, motels that would round up all of their food and keep it hostage until they were able to pay the bill. And one time, when he finally got his box of Frosted Flakes back, it was crawling with roaches. But he did have one thing. He had this shoebox that he carried with him everywhere containing nine comic books, two G.I. Joes painted to look like Spider-Man and five Gobots. And this was his treasure. This was his own assembly of heroes that kept him from drugs and gangs and from giving up on his dreams.

I'm going to tell you about one more formerly homeless member of our family. This is Scarlett. Once upon a time, Scarlet was used as bait in dog fights. She was tied up and thrown into the ring for other dogs to attack so they'd get more aggressive before the fight. And now, these days, she eats organic food and she sleeps on an orthopedic bed with her name on it, but when we pour water for her in her bowl, she still looks up and she wags her tail in gratitude.

Sometimes Brian and I walk through the park with Scarlett, and she rolls through the grass, and we just look at her and then we look at each other and we feel gratitude. We forget about all of our new middle-class frustrations and disappointments, and we feel like millionaires.

Thank you.

(Applause)