

Laundry Money

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It’s called pitching or lagging. You aim coins at a groove in the sidewalk two squares ahead of you. It’s a ten, maybe twelve-foot shot. Some play closest to line wins, some closest without going over. Landing in the groove is either automatic wins all, or loose a turn depending on which corner you happen to be playing. I hadn’t pitched since maybe junior high school, when my buddies and I would fling milk-money dimes toward a brick wall. Skilled shooters won an extra

nickel for trade up from plain to chocolate. Scrubs washed their sandwiches down with water.

It was those similar stakes that caught up with me the other afternoon. Pitching, I discovered, is alive and well, and I have the dirty clothes to prove it. My wife and I, having just moved to 18th and Racine, took it upon ourselves to dig into the new neighborhood as quickly as possible. It’s a warm, wide-open part of the city, with vaulted streets, pickup-truck vegetable vendors and packs of screaming kids kicking soccer balls up and down the alleys. Teens, grim and innocent, slouch against Caprices and bum menthols from one another. Cut-faced men sit forever on bus-stop benches, and old ladies fuss at windowbox carnations. Hacking around the neighborhood in the early afternoon, I pass a pack of kids—sixth, seventh grade at best—wearing the dark pants and white shirts required by the nearby Catholic school. They’ve set up in front of Dave’s Ice Cream Shop, and the constant jingle of the front bell testifies that Dave is doing brisk

business. On the sidewalk, in the midst of the bomb pops and candy bars, coins and trash talk are flying. I want to play. And I see that the buy-in has gone up. It’s not the penny charge from Mike Royko’s era, and even a dime won’t get you down either. Today, it’s two bits. The last shooter, a kid with black bangs draped over the frames of his glasses, is picking up a buck fifty or so, then turns back to the shoot line and I’m standing there holding my quarter and calling ins. The kids all start to goof, but I stop them short saying my money’s just as good as theirs. A dark boy with smart eyes and teeth tinted with orange pop, the ringleader I take him for, says “I’ll take your money” and calls Lasties. The other kids call third and second before I can realize the game is on. I have to go first.

Like a pool stroke or jumpshot, pitching has basic structure, but there are refinements peculiar to any one player. Some pop the coin up with their thumb in a high arch that they hope will stick flat once it hits the cement. Like a coffin-corner punt in football, where

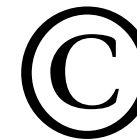
the hope is to bury an opponent behind the five-yard line, but not to let the ball bounce into the endzone, this technique has to be flawless. If it works, however, it's a near win guarantee. Others don't like those narrow odds, and instead crouch down like dice shooters, holding the coin, palm down, between thumb and forefinger. A gentle elbow extension followed by a sharp snap of the wrist sends it forward. Me, I lean way over the line, keeping my toes back, and try to push the coin ahead with a miniature underhand lob, thinking the sidewalk might reflect energy like a pond so it will skip toward the mark. Of course, instead of doing as I envision, it catches an edge and rolls, and not just down the sidewalk, but off the curb and down the street ten feet beyond the goal line. Dig twenty giggling kiddies. Twenty five cents gone.

"You all done?" the ringleader asks after he gets less than two inches from the line with his kicking thumb. The orange grin, retrieving his buck and rattling it in his triumphant fist. I think homecourt advantage, and to answer his question I call "Last!" His eyes

bug, the game's on for a repeat round. He calls third. Second and first go just as quick. Pitching cleanup, I watch my three opponents for clues. The overriding similarity is an attempt to play a slight raise in the sidewalk's right corner which, if hit well scrapes the flying coins enough to stop them right in front of the line. The exception is Ringleader, who punts again, but lands a half-foot over. I set up. "You gonna make me walk half way down the block again?" Ringleader cracks wise. Wide open laughter. But my skip-shot toward the corner hits true. The leading edge of my quarter hangs over the slot in the sidewalk and the gallery, crammed on and around the steps of the ice cream shop, fall open-mouthed quiet. The only sound is dripping Zebra cone. I want to let silence hang, but Ringleader is savvy, calling "last" as soon as I'm stooping to pick up my win. The rivalry has caught fire, and my mind snaps back to that old milk-money mode.

A couple hours later, the afternoon sun tunneling down 18th Street, I get

home and find my wife is back from work. She's surprised I wasn't there, a bit miffed that dinner isn't ready, but more put off by the hamperfull of dirty laundry in the bathroom. "You told me you'd take care of the wash today!" she says. I look at my shoes and say I didn't have any change. "The ashtray in the back room is full of quarters!" She almost shouts. "Well, it was," I say. "It was."



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Jay Ferrari is a Chicago writer who recently moved to Washington DC after being drafted by a dotcom.

His thoughts are wholesomely commonplace, unencumbered by history, enigma, holocaust or dream.

When not readying content for the web, he's trying to complete a book of short stories.

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