

Ground Up

Money: that was the source of their affection. Shiny pennies and the occasional sliver of a bottle cap fossilized with candy wrappers in rocky soil. At age four, they understood more about money than you ever did. They understood the power it contained and they understood that whoever found more was better. It paid the rent, it kept mom and dad happy, and it left food on the table. You would climb trees, your head in the clouds while they pecked at the ground with their fingers, elbows in the air, and you'd feast at the sight, calling them chickens who didn't want to play.

You went along with what they said because you were five and didn't know any better, or care to. Money hunting along sidewalk gutters, in the project lots. To you, the true collectibles were the plastic blue tags with hooks made of cheap aluminum that hung like fat, silvery birds off of rusting AC units. You'd pick them up, fallen birds with orange and blue plumes and black lettered beaks, and pocket them. When no one was looking, you'd plant them in the ground, hoping for a tree of AC unit tags to grow; a tree of orange and blue leaves, with veins of silver and black letters for bugs. To you, the tags were just like money. Both of them didn't hold value, but they looked pretty.

You would not admit that after watching Буратино (Buratino) for the first time, you had become enamored with the idea that you could plant some coins and have them grow into a tree with dollars for leaves. You planted a dollar, watered it with lemonade, and said the magic words in a kiss to the ground hoping a tree would grow.

It never did. You told yourself someone had stolen the coins after you'd worked the ground into disorder trying to find them.

You worked as a field hand when you were fourteen and you felt like you were making bank. Every day, the chickens would squawk ferociously and battle each other over scraps of food. It wasn't your job to feed the chickens but you did it anyway, hoping you'd both reach a mutual understanding that they stayed in the coop, and you'd feed them extra from time to time.

In the fields, you shear pumpkin stems three at a time, grab two at a time, and load them with the speed of three, drive them to the front and unload them, hoping that your hard work will be recognized and you'll be moved to the donut and cider stand out front, which is easy money.

But at the end of the day, when a crisp \$20 is pressed into your hand, you can't help feeling slightly cheated. It crinkles unwillingly into a tube and darkens with the dirt from your palms, making your pocket the first one to hold it, until you pass it along to someone else.

The clucking of chickens fills an empty sky as you spot something on the ground and bend to grab it. It's a penny; Lincoln's face is smudged with dirt and it looks like he's winking at you. You freeze with your back bent and elbows in the air, a growing realization. You can't pocket the inescapable feeling growing. That feeling that some people are meant to stay on the ground forever. But worse, that you might be one of them. You there, with your elbows in the air, your gawking mouth. You chicken.