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Throwing the Thimble

Jody Mace

When I was a kid I hated playing *Monopoly*, especially with my older brother. Part of it was the sheer length of the game, but the other part was invariably I either lost and was mercilessly taunted by him, or I won but was pelted by those little metal pieces. Having tiny thimbles and cars thrown at you takes a lot of the fun out of winning. My brother was a bad loser.

That formative experience ruined competition for me for a long time. I avoided board games like the plague. I was always afraid that someone would start hurling game pieces at me if I was winning, and my stomach would get tied up in knots when I was losing.

When my daughter Kyla was three someone gave her *Candyland*, so I was compelled to play it. If you're not familiar with *Candyland*, it's a fairly innocuous game that goes like this: you pick a card with a color on it, and you move your gingerbread man to the next square with that color. The idea is to get to the end of the board. The only glitch is that when you land in one of the spots like "Goopy Gumdrops" or "Stuck in Molasses Swamp" you have to stay there until you pick a certain color card.

This sent Kyla over the edge. "Oh no!" she wailed. "I'm stuck in the Masses! I'll never get out!"

Each card she drew that wasn't the right color to get her out intensified her anguish. Playing board games is supposed to be character-building for kids. They learn about following rules, and how to win and lose gracefully. The hell with that. I created a "magic card" that was always available, and whenever Kyla landed on one of those spots I swiftly gave her the card before she fell apart, and I'd say, "Lucky you! You got the magic card! You get to come out the swamp immediately!" I knew parents who were sticklers about playing fair, but I thought they were nuts. If they wanted to listen to a three-year-old wail about getting Lost in the Lollipop Woods, more power to them. I had to listen to her wail all day about real things, like my cruelty in expecting her to bathe occasionally and to eat a finite number of cookies.

Chutes and Ladders was worse, because it's one of those unbearably boring games where you think it's almost over and then something unexpected happens to extend the game. It's a moralistic game, with ladders and chutes for positive and negative consequences of your actions. You pull the cat's tail? Down the chute you plummet, and end up crying, covered by Band-aids, next to a self-satisfied cat with sharp claws. You mow the lawn? You climb the ladder and get to go to the circus. Hooray! It's tiresome, but I can be a trooper for about twenty minutes. It was when playing *Chutes*

and *Ladders* with my kids that I first started cheating.

You have to understand that I don't care who wins. I really don't. But I want *somebody* to win, and to do it fast. There's nothing worse than when someone is almost to the top, ready to end the game after *successfully* avoiding doing foolish stunts on one's bicycle, and cavorting in the puddle barefoot, only to *stupidly* climb up the counter to get to the cookie jar, and fall, ending up 53 spots lower, surrounded by shards of the broken jar and two sad-looking cookies.

When my kids were of the age to play *Chutes and Ladders* they weren't great counters, so when they landed on the "climbing for the cookie jar" spot I'd say, "Oh, no, you counted wrong. You should be one further." They never argued. They trusted me. I happily let them win because it meant that the game would be over.

Over time, things shift with kids, and you don't notice it happening. One day you're playing *Candyland* and you couldn't care less who is winning, and then the next day you find yourself actually competing with your kids in a game. For me it signaled not only the growth of my kids—that I saw them as competent—but also the awakening of a part of me that had been suppressed since I was a child: my inner competitor.

We were playing *Monopoly*. I was the shoe. I had enjoyed a magnificent streak of good fortune, as well as some shrewd bargaining, and was wiping the board up with eight-year-old Kyla and five-year-old Charlie. I controlled half of the board, from Kentucky Avenue all the way to the Boardwalk, and was methodically adding houses to my properties. Things were bleak for the car and the horse. Charlie was the first to fall, and when the outcome was clear, Kyla said she didn't want to play anymore.

"You've got to play!" I insisted. "I'm about to bankrupt you! Come on!"

She stuck it out, and I gleefully took her money and made her sell her houses and mortgage her properties. Then I noticed Charlie crying behind a chair.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm sad because you bankrobbed me," he sobbed.

"No, I didn't bankrob you. I bankrupted you. That's how you play."

"But I don't like to be bankrobbed!" he cried.

What had I become? I didn't even know that I had a competitive streak, but my ruthlessness had made my son cry. I might as well have thrown the thimble at him. Maybe *Monopoly* wasn't such a good game for us right now. Maybe the cut-throat world of high finance was too much for a five-year-old. We should play cooperative games, gentle games where everybody wins. I wiped away my sweet boy's tears.

"Mommy," Charlie looked up, "Next time, let's be a team together. We can bankrob Kyla and Daddy."

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

"You bet, Charlie. Next time we'll bankrob them together."

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