

Razor Blades and Bubblegum

When I was around three years old, my older brother and his friend took a box of double edged razor blades out from the bathroom medicine cabinet, gave them to me to play with, and closed the door.

I became fascinated with the delicate geometric precision of the ultra-thin, flexible blades, followed by the thin, red lines that began to criss-cross and create relationships against the natural lines of my small palms... until the bright red lines began to expand into small pools and I think I began to panic... and my mother burst through the door screaming.

Another time, around the same age, I was sitting on our front stoop, chewing gum for the first time (my brother gave it to me). Bazooka was the gum of choice then. A pink, rectangular brick with a line incised across the center of the long side in case you only wanted to break off and chew half at a time but most kids just chewed the whole thing at once. It cost a penny. It had a comic strip on waxed, folded paper, inside the red, white and blue outside wrapper.

I couldn't read yet, but there was a character in the strip who I immediately identified with, and whose name was Mort, who kept his head half-hidden in a turtle-neck sweater covering his mouth.

After chewing all the sweetness out of it, I had the bright idea - the curiosity really - to take the gum out of my mouth to see what it now looked like. I held it between the thumbs, and first two fingers of both hands. I noticed my teeth shapes imprinted upon it.

As I pulled the wad apart, those concave indentations, stretched into a long strand. I closed my hands to take the sticky gum off my fingers, but, nothing doing. When I pulled my fingers away again, there were now six more strands. With one more accordion like swoop, it multiplied to twelve.

Now, It was kind of fascinating - to encounter the geometric complexity, the chaos theory, occurring to an impressionable, developing mind, struggling to keep track of it all; because as I tried to remove the gum from my hands, these startling strands of bright pink, criss-crossing relationships began to create some previously unexperienced concept of infinity. I was mesmerized by it, and enjoyed it immensely...Until I didn't.

So the next step, and logical choice, was to try to wipe the gum off my hands. I thought using my hair was a good idea. It wasn't.

My fingers were now stuck to my head and if I tried to lift them, the gum pulled at my hair. I think that was the point where I started to panic...and started to cry... And my mom came screaming through the front door.

Hard Bread

I remember the time at grandpa Crisci's house. it was an apartment above my father's dry cleaners, which used to be his tailor shop. I was sitting opposite him across the long table. There was always a large bowl of fruit at the center. I think I was around 2 or 3, or pretty much, pre-verbal. I was chewing (teething?) on the sliced off 'heel' as it was called, or 'end' of the loaf of Italian bread.

"Good!", My grandfather exclaimed, with a grim smile as he pointed to his clenched, yellow teeth. "Hard bread - make teeth strong".

In order to show that I understood, I picked up a spoon and bit on it. He roared with laughter.

It pleased me to affect this change of mood that seemed out of character for him.

I remembered, as we were leaving, that he always gave us a dollar when we left (although I never saw it afterward); so I went up to him, thinking I earned it with the spoon joke, and held out my palm as if to say, "Where's the money?" This caused him to explode in an angry fit, his red face screaming in Italian at mom and dad, something like, "What kind of child are you raising?"

They hurriedly bundled me up and bounded down the stairs with me as fast as possible.

What I learned from that incident was that from then on, I would exercise a penchant for being invisible, or at least keep quiet.

Later, in second grade for instance, when Sister Maris Stella attempted to correct my cursive penmanship, comparing it to the upper and lower case letters that marched in order across the top of the blackboard. I immediately understood that she failed to appreciate my innovative flourishes. That there was no use arguing with someone who harbored no aesthetic sense whatsoever, because as nice as she seemed, I knew she was capable of shaking a boy's shoulders so violently, that his head seemed about to fly off like some defective bobble toy.

And then there was the time (but I think it must have been a dream), when I found an opened box of crayons, left in the hall and scattered across the floor (by my brother?)... And I remember being pulled and dragged across that long hall just inside the front door by my hair, by my mother; both of us screaming, and all because of the mural I had drawn on the wall - of rolling hills, and trees, and birds flying across a cloudy sky.

But I think that was only a dream.