

The Mysterious Case of the Blistered Palms

by Michael Ball

A major trick about pain is one most people never learn. It's simply that there is a physical aspect and an emotional one.

On the melodrama side of that concept is the infamous G. Gordon Liddy, Richard Nixon's favorite White House thug. He loves to retell his anecdote of holding a lit candle under one of his hands until his flesh burned. In his story, invariably an awed beauty would ask, "What's the trick," to which he would respond, "The trick is not to mind the pain."

In the sane world, athletes learn to work out injuries that most folk would take to the emergency room or at least take to bed at wail in self-pity. Likewise, during college summers as an apprentice house carpenter, I learned to pry open my fist in the morning, cramped overnight in the shape of the hammer handle. There were nails to pound that new day.

Once that trick is in the bag, you still feel pain, but you get to decide what to do about it. Is it any wonder, Liddy entitled his autobiography *Will?*

Many never have reason or desire to learn the trick. Others, like my chum Paula, have it thrust upon them. A high-school classmate and ex-girlfriend, she became a very good friend to me and a very good chef to lower Manhattan as an adult.

Every weekend, the *cookies*, as they called themselves, had new tales from Hyde Park, New York. Up the Hudson, the Culinary Institute of America mean big yucks, small giggles, back straining repetition of food prep, and sometimes wounds.

Paula had come to the Village with blisters before, but smaller, fewer and not from burns. When cookies learn the veggie slicing sizes, they really learn slicing. Julienne means strips 1/8" by 1/8" and Batonnet is 1/4" by 1/4". Attack that potato, again, and the next one. You have cramped hands, blisters, but also lots of muscle memory. You end up automatically slicing Julienne veggies as needed.

That was the sort of hand cramping I knew from a rip hammer. Hers was from a 9-inch chef's knife with a filed-down heel for pivoting easily.

Paula returned Sixth Avenue every weekend with moans and funny tales of the chefs, students and food blunders. Sometimes, she had cuts and little burns. Cookies learned to test a steak's doneness with a thumb push. As you might imagine, a broiler hot enough to grill beef muscle is indiscriminate.

The Friday evening she showed with bandages covering both palms with extreme, even for a cookie. As she told it, they were learning new techniques on soufflés most of the week.

Friday morning, she finally had achieved perfection. In her excitement, she removed her fluted porcelain dish at the optimum moment — with bare hands.

She recalls standing with the open oven ridiculing her searing flesh with blasts of heat at her pelvis. The only thought she could recall was, “I have worked all week on this. Do I drop it and repeat the process or live with the pain?”

I had that epiphany as a wrestler, she as a chef-to-be. Even that Friday, aided by a drinks with umbrellas at her favorite Chinatown restaurant, she figured it was a lesson well learned.

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