

SHOE POLISH
By TIM CUMMINGS

I was an artsy-fartsy type...on Long Island...one of the most toxically masculine domiciles in America. In addition to my pre-existing pariah-esque status for being into theater and writing, I then became a Goth. I wore all black, had a shock of silver-white hair, black fingernails and eyeliner, a surfeit of silver chains about my neck and arms. I wore Bauhaus, Christian Death, and Siouxsie and the Banshees T-shirts—and actually listened to those bands. Goth as a subculture is redolent of death, and in my case, that was true: I watched my mother decay from cancer and die at 55. I was in 10th grade. No one had any clue what I was feeling. The goth thing was protection; an attempt to convey how it felt to have the single most significant source of love that the universe bestows upon each one of us ripped away. It was black-glitter anger, a quiet seething with aesthetic properties.

Nowadays the word FREAK—once hurtled down high school hallways with such vitriol—intead contains evolved nuances. It has progressed from a *noun* to a *verb*. When I think about being called a freak (noun), I think about death, and the thing about death is, it has followed me through my life, and in one particular instance, caused me to freak (verb).

My father died, on my birthday, ten years ago. We never really got along, but he was a provider. He wordlessly helped me through the early starving-artist days of New York City. Before he died, I had also lost two siblings, so when I meet up with my remaining siblings in Florida to bury him, I am mired in an existential filial crisis: both parents dead, two siblings dead.

I neither want to be parentless at 35 nor face the reality that my family has been halved. I mean, how am I ever gonna qualify for Life Insurance?! In Florida, the wicked dynamics of siblings ensue—vigorously. Being the youngest, I am deemed the brattiest and most melodramatic. With no desire to encourage these innuendos, I keep to myself.

One of my older siblings, Glenn, is, for me, the most ‘older brotherly’ of my sibs. Shy, reticent, a gentle giant with dreamy sky-blue eyes, he has always been there for me during those aforementioned starving artist days. He’d drive his big truck into the city, and carry furniture, boxes of books and cd’s up and down several flights of stairs in stifling NYC humidity...usually, like, every four months because the life of the young starving artist is nothing if not perpetually peripatetic. He was kind of a protector for me...though it was comingled with resentment. He was jealous that I had theater and writing, an identity, and got all A’s in school and received scholarships to go to NYU. He was a high school dropout due to his social anxiety. He was never without three jobs at once, though. He’s one of the hardest-working guys I’ve ever known.

I’m in Florida without my partner Paul, so I don’t have a grounding presence around me. Instead, my anxiety is at its apex due to the prolix alpha-Republican ramblings of my brother-in-law, the bossiness of my two eldest siblings, the dark-wash of death’s organizational components

that hinder your ability to grieve healthily, and perhaps most exasperatingly, an emotional tug-of-war with Glenn.

At one point I say, “I need to go out and get some things.”

“What things?” Glenn barks.

“For the funeral. Like an electric razor, and a belt. I forgot both. Just, stuff.”

“I need shoe polish,” he says. “Get me shoe polish.”

“Take my car, Timmy,” my sister yells out. “Take my credit card. Keys and card are on the kitchen island.”

“Fine,” I say.

Glenn sighs infuriatingly, throws his hands up, and walks out the door, like it’s some horrible insult against him that I get to take the car, run an errand, that my sister offers to pay.

Wandering the white-washed aisles of the Walgreen’s, agitated by thoughts of all the death in my family, of not having parents anymore, of wondering what this mercurial career has in store for me, I buy snacks, stickers, face masks, whiskey, a fake plant, a real plant, over-the-counter sleep-aid, black socks, black eyeliner, mass market paperbacks, magazines, lollipops (I hate lollipops) and shoe polish. I have four big bags of stuff, and I bring them into the house. I drop the bags on the island and go for a walk so I can revel in the stunning purples and pinks of a Florida sunset.

When I return, the bags are emptied out all over the island, all of the stuff splayed.

Everyone is sitting around the table while my niece and nephew serve dinner.

“Where’s my shoe polish?” Glenn snaps at me.

I look at the stuff...I don’t see shoe polish. “But...I bought it. I know I did.”

“You took the car, you used Liz’s card, you bought all this stupid shit for YOURSELF, and you didn’t get shoe polish. What’s this?” he says, picking up the eyeliner. “Gonna wear black eyeliner to Daddy’s funeral, Timmy?”

“I might.”

“Don’t you dare,” my brother-in-law snarls.

“Now I *really* might,” I say.

My jaw shudders. My kneecaps go cold. “Glenn, what exactly are you angry about? That I took the car? That Liz offered to pay? That your shoe polish got lost? By the way,” I say, sliding the credit card across the counter, “I didn’t take her card. I paid for all of this.”

He violently scooches his chair in, picks up his fork, and shovels food into his mouth, mumbling incessantly under his breath like a maniac. I hurry outside, pop the trunk, see a bag I forgot to bring in. Ah! Inside the bag: shoe polish. I grab it, slam the trunk, walk back inside, and drop the bag onto the island.

“Is that my shoe polish?” Glenn says.

“It is.”

“Why’d you leave it in the car? So, I couldn’t use it? So, you didn’t have to give me my shoe polish? Ass.”

“If you say SHOE POLISH one more time, there are going to be TWO funerals this family has to deal with. You fucker. HERE!” I dump out the contents of the bag. Much to my surprise—because I don’t remember doing this at all—there are like eleven different shoe polishes in there. I pick them up, and one by one, fling them at Glenn’s face: “SHOE POLISH, SHOE POLISH, ALL I HEAR IS SHOE POLISH, SHOE POLISH. WELL, HERE’S BLACK, AND LOOK I GOT BROWN TOO. THERE’S THIS CLEAR KIND THAT’S MORE OF A

SHEEN THAN A POLISH. AND HERE'S THE KIND IN THE LITTLE TINS ALL HARD AND GUMMY THAT YOU HAVE TO FUCKING SPIT ON. OH LOOK, HERE'S RED SHOE POLISH TOO. ANYONE NEED RED? ANYONE WEARING RED SHOES?"

I look up and everyone around the table is staring at me in horror. My poor niece and nephew whom I love so much are just *distraught*. I am in full throttle freak mode. Glenn has a cut above his eyebrow and it's bleeding. Bottles and tins of shoe polish litter the kitchen floor.

Nothing is ever the same between me and Glenn.

Our relationship sullies after that. I love him, so much, feel so close to him, but we don't speak that much anymore, and I always kinda' feel bad for him because I fear that he's lonely and the quintessential bachelor. I want more for him. But my freak out because of the death of my father, and the entry into the reality that the family had been halved, and that we were now orphans, took its toll.

Glenn died suddenly about two months ago.

He was 49.

I haven't been back to my hometown much since the days I was called a freak. But I go there to bury him. For the first time in my life, I actually feel like a freak. Not a manufactured one. No T-shirts, no necklaces, no armor. A real freak. To see old neighborhood and high-school friends and acquaintances pour into the Funeral Home in droves to pay their respects; all of them with siblings and parents still alive, still intact? I am a freak who's ready to freak out. Where is my family? There were eight of us, now there are three. The Grim Reaper— is he my fucking lover, or what?

There was a little kiosk beside the concierge desk at the hotel back home. Just a small set of shelves with miniature mouthwashes, toothbrushes, snacks, etc. I stopped there to grab some gum on my way to the funeral.

The bottom shelf had a spread of all these little shoe polishes. I shook my head.

They just looked so small.