

Spit Shine

For the fourth time, Greg pulls the sample sweater from the test machine. He fingers the chemically engineered stain that, despite months of research and innumerable computer calculations, remains steadfast. With a dark blue center that bleeds out towards its edges, like an evil eye, it stares right back at him.

For fuck's sake.

As he pinches the stain, trying in vain to pluck it from the cotton-polyester blend fibres, somewhere on the Atlantic a barge is heading to dock, eager to unload the 16 shipping containers packed to the gills with what Greg promised would revolutionize the detergent industry. With the confirmation that his calculations were perhaps too bold, too experimental, the crushing weight of thousands of useless detergent bottles bears down on Greg's shoulders. He rests his forehead against the open front-loading washer door. A hard lump grows raw in his throat, pushing out a small ragged moan.

Growing up, like a tidy shadow, Greg followed his mother around constantly. He watched, admiring her deft hands pretreat, wash, and fold every soiled garment that dared roll through her laundry room. Kids his age turned to little league coaches and super-heroes to understand the world around them, but Greg? He coveted the likes of Mr. Clean and The Brawny Man—just two members of the cavalry his mother employed to erase the storm clouds that hung heavy over their turbulent family unit. The cleaning mascots' strength, their composure, their eagerness to lend a helping hand... to Greg, there was nothing more heroic. Sure, their double dose of rippling muscles and ambiguous sexualities were difficult for him to ignore even then, but more than anything else, Greg clung to their dedication to all things perfect and tidy.

Dad's just come home. Sunlight floods through the small basement window, and Greg has already eaten breakfast. He is only one bowl of cereal away from being able to open the prize, today his small fingers even brushed the pointy edge of the thick wax coated paper that protects it from the cereal. He knows better than to prod the wrapper further. Mom believes in order, and always makes him wait until the cereal is gone to enjoy whatever prize the box contains. He admires that about her. Celine Dion's crooning seeps through the floorboards, announcing the start of his father's morning routine: coffee, disrobing and throwing clothes down the laundry shoot, securing two spoons from the freezer, and lying on their couch comatose. Greg watches his mother carefully. She sifts through the hamper, judging degree of dirt and...perhaps something else, he can't tell. Mysterious stains decorate his father's clothing, and with an expert hand and myriad concoctions, his mother restores every fiber to its pristine condition—as though his father has never left the house.

The lump in his throat follows him home, invites itself to dinner, and spoons with him as he lays on the couch, calcifying the fear of failure. There's no escaping the sinking feeling that his career—no, *his life*—is on the precipice of an epic nose dive. He imagines the grace of an olympic diver, pristine and hairless, winding up for his quick three step leap from the board. Arms up, down, swinging around—two beautifully toned legs and a tiny speedo following suit. The diver reaches the edge of the board and...chokes. His sculpted form looks mangled in midair. The crowd stares in silence. Aghast. He splashes, a chalk-white outline of his body lingers in his wake. He is dead in the water. And so is Greg.

To calm his nerves, he scrolls through hundreds of home shopping channels in hopes that the promise of a better life (*for three easy installments of 12.99, payable by check or money order*) can lull him to sleep before tomorrow's status meeting. For the next six hours, Greg

tosses and turns—dreams of failure blend seamlessly with Hot Hands™ *The Silicone Gloves Tough Enough to Handle All the Hot Stuff!*, rejection with Miracle Copper™ *Anti Fatigue Compression Socks*, and dying alone with the Egg-Tastic™ Ceramic Microwave Egg Cooker.

He wakes up stale and dry-mouthed just as his favorite Magic Bullet™ infomercial is coming to a close. He loves how the guests huddle around the Magic Bullet™'s features, amazed at every 6 and 7 second recipe. Mimi and Mick, the protagonists of this half-hour production, flutter about their kitchen in early 2000's garb. They banter, they joke, they remember details about the other part goes. Center stage, the pair light up the kitchen set, it is impossible not to fall in love with them. In 30 minutes, the Magic Bullet™ holds more care and community than Greg has experienced in his 26 year long life. It's the community Greg longs for. He wants nothing more than to use the Magic Bullet™'s 6 second guacamole to fill the gaps he's grown weary of guarding.

A common feature of Greg's robust morning routine, he composes an outfit of his favorite clothing items: gray pleated trousers under a dark blue dress shirt that feature tiny, equally spaced polkadots. His socks are a brilliant red accent that he slides into walnut monk strap shoes, shined to perfection. A small scuff on the toe of his right shoe rips through his line of vision. Suddenly bleary eyed and breathing heavily, Greg walks to one of his many small closets and scans through his arsenal of tools and potions.

Four or five fluid strokes of an artgum eraser remove any material the offending scuffer has left behind. Then, with a non-acetone nail polish remover and a microfiber towel, the damage is lifted from existence and as quickly as the scuff announced itself, it is gone. He gently applies a kiss of shoe polish and buffs until the walnut glows—his worried eyes glimmer white in its oiled surface. Exhaling, he wraps himself up in his favorite leather jacket, calmed further by its musky scent, and heads for the door.

Celine Dion, slowly replaced by shouting, steps further and further away from her passionate declarations of love. Greg examines the collection of dress shirts before him—each containing a painting of mystery stains and fluids that would make Jackson Pollock sick with jealousy. His hands run over Mom’s collection of labeled bottles—all featuring bright and cheerful text and faces. He mimics her routine. He loses himself in the short term relief of cleanliness, his parents’ angry duet consumed by the shh, shh, shh-ing of the dryer.

The walk to his boss’s office stretches out before him. Each step feels heavier, less stable, and more dreadful. By the time he makes it to Mr. Bishop’s door, his colon is by his ankles and his knees have the constitution of overboiled linguini. He knocks gently before pushing through the smokey glass door.

Mr. Bishop has the effortless style of someone who has never had to cross their fingers while checking their ATM balance mixed with someone who has never made anyone come. He is beautiful and very aware of it. His teeth flash almost blue against his impeccable spray tan as he invites Greg to sit down before him. Greg obliges, catching the reflection of his dark hair in the fingerprint-less PETER BISHOP, CMO placard, and smooths it down.

“We’re really really excited about this, G. Reaaaaally ex-cite-ed. So what’s going on down in R&D, make me happy, sonny.”

Mr. Bishop leans forward in his seat and adjusts a photo of a blonde bombshell in a sheer white cover-up, lying back playfully in a beach chair.

Greg swallows hard, trying to ease the lump that continues its pursuit for freedom.

“I don’t know how to tell you, sir...it seems there was a fluke in the programming--”

Mr. Bishop’s eyes flash wickedly, waiting for his prey to make the next move.

“Despite all of our testing, it seems...in practice, we’ve reached a stumbling block...of sorts...”

“Of...sorts?” Mr. Bishop leans in further.

“Project Coleoptera can’t even lift fresh stains, sir. And...certainly not washed in ones...as we had projected...it seems that...I may have gotten too carried away with the material cutting, sir...”

Mr. Bishop exhales slowly. It isn’t anger that’s contorting his face. Rather, Mr. Bishop is smiling.

“Wow. Wow, wow wow. Well. you’ve let down a lot of people, here, Greg-o.” His face brightens, “and I don’t know what to tell ya...” He leans in even further.

“We all know I hate doing this” he says through smiling teeth, his face getting closer and closer to Greg’s.

“Yes sir...I understand...”

Mr. Bishop does not hate doing this. He absolutely loves it. From behind his well staged desk, he’s been counting down the days until the next soap innovation goes to shelf so he can kick Greg to the curb and find some other young, cheap mind to work on their next project. Sure, the product’s failure means he’ll have to push back their family vacation and Natasha will certainly bitch about that for a few weeks. But hey, that’s the business and it’s nothing a trip to Tiffany’s can’t fix. He sends out a tearful Greg, calls his wife, and rubs one out.

With his shirt collar unbuttoned and his face leaden with defeat, Greg trudges through the lobby of Mathers and Mathers, sweat collecting under his arms and down his back. The place that’s shaped the roots of his career and where he’s proven himself time and time again as a crucial asset to their R&D department—that has proudly framed gleaming magazine reviews about the formulas that he himself created—has plucked him from their garden and threw him out. The doorman, who on every other day greets Greg with an excited warmth and a fist bump, looks down as he passes, feigning interest in yesterday’s half completed crossword puzzle.

Greg drifts into a bar a couple blocks away from the agency. He tucks into one, then two, then three cosmopolitans; each sip sending a shiver down his spine. It's been ages since he last drank. He doesn't like the warmth in his belly and the looseness with which his words escape him. Drunk Greg is an embarrassing cousin, one who overshares and is just far, far too touchy. But hey, Drunk Greg is better than nobody.

“Okay, maybe if we shift the surfactant to filler ratio just a smidge more...” he manipulates the page of code in front of him, his fingers moving with the fluidity of a jazz pianist’s, “we could potentially...make up budget in manufacturing...and yes!” Greg is a fresh junior researcher at Mathers and Mathers, and with a few lines of coding he has just managed to cut costs and maintain the detergent’s structural integrity enough to prove its superiority claim. He is on fire. He is unstoppable.

The bartender shakes him awake, “Alright, bud, I think it’s time to head home.” Greg peels his sticky face from the bar. It has been a few hours at least, maybe days, he can’t tell. He groggily pays his bill—tipping generously—and stumbles into the fresh night air. Aimlessly, he saunters from block to block, letting his time at Mathers and Mathers wash over him. It has been a year of climbing the detergent ladder one rung at a time, the top getting closer and closer with each tweak and dollar saved. But then, it all had to come crashing down—with the impending taste of success ripped from his lips.

Mom is pressing Dad’s shirts as Greg watches from the foot of the bed. Crisp edges match up perfectly as she stacks them one by one into Dad’s large suitcase. And then a smaller suitcase, and what doesn’t fit, she reluctantly places into his gym bag. Greg helps her carry

them down stairs and onto the front lawn. He doesn't ask why, and instead treats this as any other chore around the house.

After, he is standing by the garbage in the kitchen, having just thrown away food he can't stomach. Dad is banging on the front door. Greg's hand reaches into the trash and removes a hamburger, dips it into ketchup and coffee grounds, and smears it onto his pastel polo.

The uncertainty of where he is is softened by the diffuse glow of neon lights around him. People file in and out of dark openings that line the streets. Greg lets his eyes linger, absorbing the scenes around him hungrily. Couples making out on street corners, men greeting each other, joining hands and walking into bars, and drunk girls decorating unwatched stoops, crying into their phones. He ambles into an alley that's opening glows so brightly, it casts the sidewalk in a flickering purple. He gasps. Lined up outside a glowing doorway is a group of the most beautiful creatures he's ever seen: carbon copies of Mr. Clean and the Brawny Man festooned in the shiniest patent leather. Goosebumps pucker his skin. Amidst the heavenly selection harnesses, buckles, and boots Greg feels something new, and like a moth to a flame he weaves through the sea of skin, through the glowing door, and down a flight of stairs, eager to see what these shiny sirens are guarding.

Silence consumes the house. Greg steals his mom's radio, takes his sullied polo shirt and escapes to the basement. With the radio blaring and the washing machine working its magic, Greg falls asleep, spooned by the machine's warm exterior.

“\$20 for entry and clothing check,” barks a small butch woman from a packed coat check. Mechanically he hands her a bill. His heart pounds. Drunk Greg is getting away with

something. She gives him the up and down, “give me your pants and shirt. Leave the shoes.” He hands her his rumpled shirt and stained pants, wearing now only a black pair of Calvin Klein jockey shorts and, of course, the monkstrap Florsheims.

Greg steps through a black velvet curtain. Pushing through the scent of bodies and well cared for leather, something familiar catches his nose. Navigating through droves of greased up chests and trimmed beards, he steps into a dark clearing.

A man searching for water in a desert can only know how Greg feels in this moment. Boots, as far as the eye can see. Tall boots, short boots, boots with chains, boots with fringe. Any kind of boot you can possibly imagine—and every type of man to match—lined up, waiting to be shined. Delicious. The chemical smell of sweat and shoe polish fills up Greg’s nose and brings tears to his eyes. His mouth waters. A boyish man in a dog mask works furiously at the feet of an imposing crew cutted man in a lambskin harness. He may be fast, but Greg can’t help but notice the boy’s lack of form, finesse, and thoroughness. He slyly creeps up to the shiner. At first, the dog masked boy ignores Greg, paying attention only to the gruff man chastising him as he buffs his matte thigh high Doc Martens. A second siren sits at the station above Greg’s head, and stares down at him expectantly.

“WELL?” He booms. Greg freezes, feeling ill equipped without his brushes, potions, and microfiber towels. The man continue to berate Greg, raining titillating saliva down onto his face. Greg grabs a rag from next to the dog faced boy, and without thinking spits onto the leather siren’s boots. He buffs and buffs and as he catches his reflection in the man’s boots, he smiles.

With a worker ant precision, Greg polishes like no shoe shiner before him. The men come and go, grabbing his cheeks, occasionally cracking a crop, and ruffling his hair. No formulas, no potions. He is on fire. He is unstoppable.