

1982

## The Lighter

John Zarchen  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Zarchen, John (1982) "The Lighter," *Exile*: Vol. 29 : No. 2 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol29/iss2/29>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

## The Lighter

Horace had acquired the lighter in a flea-market barn at 3:30 in the morning, on the eve of his 21st birthday celebration, with his friend Al and two ladies of the night: Gatsby and Flatsy. It was a beautiful, slim, rectangular lighter with a bold "Winston" logo guled on both sides. Gatsby and Al had knocked over a small table after completing a generous liberation of mutual energy, and the lighter had cracked Horace in the forehead as it fell; Horace and Flatsy had been on the other side of the table.

Horace had treasured the lighter fiercely from that moment on. He carried it with him everywhere, told all of his friends the circumstance of its acquisition countless times, and never really forgot about Flatsy and Gatsby. Horace was not a smoker, and Al chided him repeatedly for still carrying the lighter after twenty years.

"It doesn't even work." He told Horace almost every day as they drove home from work.

"I like it." Horace said.

"It's juvenile Horace. Grown men don't carry beat up old lighters around that don't work, and tell stupid stories about hookers to every Joe that walks by the newstand."

"I like it." Horace said.

"Especially if they don't smoke!"

"I like it." Horace said.

"Horace, you embarass me. How long have we been partners? Huh? Nineteen years, right? Well let me tell ya' somethin': There're a lotta things you do that make me get a headache, and one of 'ems clickin' that dumb lighter at people when they walk by an' sayin' 'Wanna know where I got this? Wanna know where I got this?' Nōbody cares Horace. It's a dumb story, it was twenty years ago, and nobody cares!"

Horace didn't say anything. He just sat in the front seat watching a little dog chase a moped down the street. He palmed the lighter out of his pocket, and gently played the side of it with his thumb. Horace did this often. He had been rubbing the lighter for so long that the "s", "t", and "o" from the middle of "Winston" had been erased, and there was a skin polished mirror of metal in their place. To Horace the lighter was a small hand mirror with a message: "Win". He had once mentioned this to Al, but he simply chuckled maliciously and threatened to steal it.

The lighter had been the subject of many altercations between not only Al and himself, but also his mother. Mrs. Shilling felt that toying with the lighter was a childish vice not unlike sucking one's thumb. She told Horace this repeatedly, but in his usual way he became violent, and the matter was temporarily forgotten. Tonight, though, Horace was going to end all disputes, cease all berating once and for all; he was going to fix the lighter.

He had been planning to fix the lighter for a long time, but now the night had finally come. He was seated quietly at the paisley formica desk in his room. His mother was downstairs playing MaJong with Mrs. Abrahms, Mrs. Pentkowski, and Clara Norville. Clara was a spinster, and a busy-body in every dimension, so Horace had been careful to lock the door. He had also lowered the blind by his bed to guard from his neighbor AARon Schwartz, also a four dimensional busy-body practised in curiosity. Horace clicked on his fluorescent reading lamp, and took the lighter out of his pocket.

With the lighter squarely set in front of him he opened the top drawer of his desk, removed, and arranged his tools: a large can of Zippo lighter fluid, five flints in a red plastic dispenser, a single sided razor blade, and fifteen of his mother's bobby pins. He started by removing the plastic-dipped nubs from the end of each bobby pin with his fingernails. When he finished this he wiped his fleshy palms along the tops of his thighs, and picked up the lighter. He gently pressed the bar mechanism on the top of the lighter with his right forefinger to activate the flint stone. The small metal housing attached to the bar sprang upwards revealing the wick, but there was no spark.

Using the razor blade, Horace unscrewed the flint spring at the base of the lighter. He took out the spring, inserted a new flint, re-screwed the screw, and clicked the bar again. Still no spark. He unscrewed the flint spring again and jammed a bobby pin up through the hole, figuring that it was blocked. When the bobby pin was sufficiently mangled from twisting and grinding in the tiny flint hole, Horace re-inserted the new flint and tried again. Still no spark. Easily frustrated, Horace moaned loudly.

"Are you alright Horace?" His mother called up to him.

"Yes Mother. Just a little gas that's all."

"I told you not to eat that chink food in the fridge, it's been there a week an' a half!"

"Yes Mother." Horace called back, and returned to the lighter.

The problem, Horace deduced rather cleverly, was the flint stone; it was not turning when the bar mechanism was activated. So with his razor he began to unfasten the two small screws that lay on either side of the bar mechanism where it joined the flint-and-wick-housing. When the screws were out he gingerly pressed them to the formica with his pudgy fingers. "Stay" he said aloud. With this done he then slowly released his grip on the bar mechanism, letting the flint-and-wick-housing plink to the desktop, along with the flint stone, and several minute metal gears. "Oh no." Horace said as he gazed down at the strange pieces of machinery swirling in his paisly desktop.

First he picked up the flint wheel, and carefully scraped it clean with a bobby pin. Then he applied several liberal squirts of lighter fluid to the housing unit, and wiped it clean with his shirt tail. Following this examined two doily-like metal gears and decided that they must fit into the two doily-like holes in the mechanical bar-arm, which was now soberly extended by its spring from the lighter. The final piece of hardware to be examined appeared to be a miniture, black coat hanger. The hook part was cut, though, and inverted. Horace didn't know whether to scrape it, polish it, or pour lighter fluid on it, so he just fondled it contemplatively.

Suddenly he made a connection. It was not a brilliant connection, not even an intelligent one. It was merely a remembered image re-applied on a smaller scale. Horace had once been to the clock tower at Notre Dame. He had been fascinated by the precision of each piece of the clock's machinery, and now he saw the same precision in his precious lighter. He picked up the flint stone. It was round and one side was fluted like a paddle wheel, or, as Horace thought, like the huge wooden second-hand wheel of the clock at Notre Dame. He picked up the minute hanger and pressed the two together. The inverted part of the hanger fit snugly into the notched flint wheel. Using a bobby pin, Horace turned the flint wheel while keeping the two mechanisms pressed together. Completing one fifth of a revolution the inverted piece of the hanger clicked into place again, for the notches were formed in a circular quincunx. Horace rotated the wheel again. Another click. And he did it again. "Click", and Horace exploded in a fit of maniacal laughter.

"Are you alright Horace?" His mother called again.

"Yes mother. I told you, just a little gas that's all."

"Didn't sound like no gas to me."

"Yes mother." And Horace stifled his excited laughter.

Now realizing the principle of the flint wheel mechanism, he gathered up the housing and doily-gears. Straining to keep the hanger piece aligned, he reconstructed the housing unit and passed it to his left forefinger and thumb so that it would be ready to insert into the bar mechanism. Using his free right hand he clutched up the lighter, and pressed the sprung-bar down to its original position. His armpits were becoming quite wet, and his nervous palms twitched a little under the fluorescent light.

Breathing rapidly, Horace brought his left and right fingers together. The doily-like gears of the housing meshed with the bar mechanism instantly, and Horace fought to suppress squeals of delight. Pressing tenderly with his left thumb, he lowered the integrated unit until he could see a pin dot of light through the screw holes on the outer frame of the lighter. He pushed in the first screw. He pushed in the second screw. He tightened them with his razor blade.

He quickly fumbled with the lighter to re-insert the flint and flint spring. He tightened it. The razor blade pinged out of his trembling fingers, and he finished the job with his thumbnail. Then he undid the screw over the fluid fill hole. The plastic nipple on the Zippo can was not pouring fast enough, and Horace wrenched the entire top off with his teeth. He poured lighter fluid into the hole spilling much of it on the desk and floor. He replaced the fluid-filler hole screw. He gave a short prayer. He clicked the bar mechanism of his twenty year old-Winston-acquired-in-a-flea-market-barn-with-two-hookers-lighter. And then he screamed.

"What are you doin' up there Horace?" Horace didn't answer.

"Horace, you answer me when I talk to you!" She shrieked.

"Let's go up an' see what he's doin'." Clara Norville said.

"Maybe he's hurt himself." offered Mrs. Pentkowski.

"He's too dumb to do that" Horace's mother answered, "but maybe we should just go check anyhow."

And when the four ladies opened Horace's door they gasped momentarily, and then screamed. For there was Horace, his shining face reflected in the thumb-print mirror of his lighter, engulfed in flames at his paisley desk. As the women shrieked, Horace was obliviously murmuring "I win. I win.", and lighting and re-lighting his newly fixed lighter.

John Zarchen