

It's a Black Thing

My wrap gift on the movie *Black Dog* was a Zippo lighter, given to me by the director Kevin Hooks, a really swift guy who you may remember as the skinny black basketball player in the television show *The White Shadow*. In *Black Dog* I played a bad-guy truck-driver thug, under the tutelage of Meat Loaf, you know, the singer. It was high art, the kind of movie people watch over and over and over, even if they think it sucks. I blow up in it.

On the bottom two-thirds of the front of the lighter, boldly written in black letters, is the word DOG. Centered on the bottom two thirds of the back of the lighter in small caps is written, IT'S A BLACK THING. I love the lighter and though I don't smoke (it's rare, but I will draw the odd bit of legal leaf around the holidays, and when the weather starts to coldn' up), I use it to light my fires and to entertain myself while I'm driving.

If you are a serious bike rider, you can bring up in your head the sound made from clipping your shoes into the pedals. I wouldn't recognize that sound if it were played for me in high def. Yet most all of us recognize the sound the lid of the lighter makes when it clicks open and shut.

With your right hand, click the lighter lid open to the left. With your thumb, flick the ignition roller against the flint to bring the wick to flame. To close the lighter lid, jerk your right arm up swiftly to the right seven inches, and stop abruptly. The lid will slam shut with a sound that is unmistakable.

Let the lighter lie in the palm of your right hand and allow your fingers to close in around it. It feels shiny, smooth, and soft, and it's the perfect weight to hold. I keep the lighter nearby so when the feeling hits me I can reach out, grab it, hold it, and roll it around on my palm and through my fingers. It's made specifically to be held by hands the size of which are attached to me. No it's not. But I like to think it is.

Not sure a new one has an odor, but once used, a lighter's smell is familiar, traceable to your pipe-smoking favorite uncle, your dad's best fishing buddy, or the wild next-door-neighbor kid who would steal his older brother's lighter (he had 11 siblings, nine brothers and two sisters) to use once you both got to your favorite place in the woods where you'd light damp leaves and twigs just to watch them burn. You had to have become familiar with lighters somehow, somewhere, at sometime in your life.

The hinge on which the top and bottom parts of the lighter connect is so tight and efficient, watching it work one wonders if it might last to infindom. (How cool a word is infindom? I made it up. Does it work for you? It means forever. I could have used a thousand other words, but infindom fit rhythmically, especially putting *to* ahead of it. It's great being able to make up rules. Presidential candidates do it, why shouldn't I?)

Watching the five-section hinge work, one thing seems apparent: it'll never need oiling. I've never seen such a hinge as the hinge on my Zippo.

Hold the lighter with your right hand, pull open the lid with your left. With your right thumb resting on the round, dimpled striker, pressing the lighter body down against your curled-in middle finger, you roll the striker a third turn against the flint; here again you hear what I and so many others in the universe hear, the sound the striker makes scratching against the flint—the simple clickish-rubbing, very small and quick sound. You'd know it if you heard it, even lying on your death bed about to take air for your final breath. It's a sound that's fondly familiar.

Grab hold of the chimney and pull the body of the lighter from the shell. Directly opposite the round striker is a one-third-inch long lever that controls the opening and closing of the lid. This lever is the piece from which the most familiar sound of any gadget in existence is made. Tick, it opens, clack it shuts. Tick clack, tick clack. Looking at the lever's design and construction, one gets the idea that you could tick open and clack shut the lighter lid for years before it would fail and need repair.

The shell bottom is capped snug with an inch by one-quarter inch piece of thick felt that holds in the lighter-fluid soaked cotton—your lighter's fuel cell. You pull up the felt and soak the cotton to the point just before the wick takes fluid. If the wick takes fluid you need to touch a match flame to it to burn off the excess fluid so the wick will light dry off the lighter flint. How on earth the wick takes an amount of fluid to light and burn time and time and time after time, just so, is one of countless majestic qualities the lighter boasts.

In my eight years of Zippo-lighter ownership, not once have I thought that I might some day need to repair or replace the wick. The wick takes a lickn' and keeps on wickn'. It's wicked. It's never wicked me off. I think you can read about it on Wikipedia. You can tell I get a real kick out of the wick, it's slick. It's sick! It can light a stick. Chicks love it. So do hicks and St. Nick.

So technologically advanced and simply amazing is my lighter's design, I often forget that the point of it is to make flame.

I get a good deal of pleasure from my lighter. It's a long-lasting slow-burn pleasure; an unexpected affection to an object that in my mind is remarkable and ingenious. My lighter makes my day. My lighter is my Eighth Wonder of the World. My lighter is a magnificent piece of equipment. A great tool is my lighter. It's art. My lighter is a joy to behold, and hold. I'm going to go play with it right now.