

Buffer Zone

A day with Penny Simmons, madam of Toronto's shoe-shining underground

By Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall Photograph by Eden Robbins

"THIS IS YOUR FIRST TIME," says Penny. "You're a virgin, so we're going to do everything to you." She looks up at me with a coy smile as I shift my position. "Are you ready for this?" I nod and Penny lets out a slow, breathy laugh. "You might want to hold on to the handles." And with that, she lays her hands on my shoes.

I am sitting in a custom-made, eight-foot-high throne of oak veneer and rich leather. I take hold of the handles by my sides as Penny rolls up the cuffs of my pants. Slowly she looks down, then up and deep into my eyes. "First," she says, "I'll teach you how to tie your laces."

Until recently I never gave much thought to shoe-shining—or even shoes, for that matter. In fact, my footwear has left a wake of frustration wherever I've roamed: girlfriends who've despaired that I won't go shoe shopping; possible employers who've unfortunately caught a glimpse of my shoes before looking at my resumé. But then, this Christmas, everything changed.

My older brother, who is a successful entrepreneur insofar as he owns a small candle factory, enjoys giving me presents that highlight my lack of a real job. This year was no exception.

"Here," he said, "I got you a career," and then watched while I tore the wrapping off a brand-new shoeshine box.

"Thanks," I said. Then, in a confused attempt to get the upper hand, I spent much of my Christmas

dinner trying to shine the shoes of all our guests.

Soon after, I found myself at a party regaling a pretty actress named Jenny Young with this story. "Oh yeah," she said, "I'm a shoe-shiner, too." At first I thought she was kidding, but now here I am: at Jenny's place of work, surrounded by lovely young shoeshine ladies, getting my first-ever shine from the disarming and seductive Penny Simmons—madam of Toronto's underground malls, Jenny's boss and the owner of Penny Loafers Shoe Shine Company. I'm here to learn the craft, and Penny is a hands-on teacher.

After showing me how to tie my shoes with the double toe loop ("twice around the bush with the bunny"), she pops the tin—snapping open a can of polish with one hand, while shouting, "Ole!" Then Penny "slaps the wax," fingers drumming from tin to leather like a single-minded rumba queen—at least I think that's the order in which this has happened. I'm a bit distracted by what's going on now; Penny is "getting down to the special sauce." She has dipped her middle finger into a bottle of mysterious white cream, pulled it out again, and is now proceeding to do something to my feet, right through the leather of my boots, that I can't even begin to describe.

"You like the special sauce?" asks Penny, rubbing her fingers into my soul. "I teach all the girls to do this. Not everybody's here for a shine. Mostly they're here to get away from the troubles of their day."

"Uh-huh," I say. But what I mean is, "Please, God, don't let it stop."

Penny insists it is merely coincidence that all 12 of her shiners are attractive, charming and female. And yet over the course of the day she continually refers to shoe-shining as "the world's second oldest profession," as if glorying in its proximity to the first. She has great pride in her "girls." It is important for her that each one of them has a career beyond shoe-shining. In fact, this group of a dozen women is made up of a playwright, a filmmaker, an artist, a stage director, a belly dancer and a few graduate students. They are all talented shoe-shiners as well, but happy to leave the suggestive seductiveness of shoe-shining—something I never knew even existed—to Madam Penny.

She has the brushes out now—two bushy ones that she twirls in the air. She's going at both my shoes at the same time; then suddenly she stops and asks: "Do you want to see my knockers?"

Before I have time to blush, she knocks the wooden handles together with a few loud clacks, and then keeps on brushing.

IT USED TO BE that shoe-shiners were as common as barbers, back when boys went with their fathers for a haircut and a shoeshine. There was also a time when a lot of young Canadian men were soldiers—taught to make their beds every morning and shine their shoes every evening. But then



Canadian men stopped fighting in wars and started growing their hair long and wearing sneakers. And thus, shoe-shiners became a thing of the past.

Penny Simmons says hers is the only independent shoe-shining chain in Canada, and in fact, in the "Shoe Shining" section of the Toronto Yellow Pages Penny Loafers is the only listing. For those businesses listed under "Shoe Repair," shining represents a relatively small part of total income, with shoes dropped off by clients for an impersonal, often motorized buff. Spiros Marinos, whose father, Nick, opened Nick's Shoes in Toronto's Dupont-

Davenport area over 40 years ago, is surprised to hear about Penny's operation and sees it more as a revelation than as competition. "I can't remember the last time there were shoeshine bars in Canada," he says. "And young women! And they do it all by hand! It's amazing!"

When I tell Penny this — that one of the old guard of Canadian shoe care is giving her props — she beams. At 40-something years of age, she has worked this business up from what she describes as "me alone, standing in a mall, embarrassed," to hundreds of shoes being shined for six bucks a pair

at four prime locations in Toronto's downtown underground (Penny's Loafettes also do special events). And even with all her special sauce and her knocking, Penny Simmons still considers herself a purist. "The heel," she says, "is the acid test of shoe-shining. If you've got a good heel, you've got a good shine. And we give good shine."

BY THE END of the day, I'm getting what I really came here for. I've practised on Penny's feet, and now the property manager of the Royal Bank Plaza is sitting in front of me in the big oak throne, waiting to have his shoes shined. I have my jacket off, my knees slightly bent and my right hand is clutching a cloth. But before I can begin, Penny stops me. "Look at his laces," she says.

They are pulled straight across, with the diagonals on the underside of the lace flaps. "You can tell a lot about a man by his laces," says Penny, as the property manager looks down at us quizzically. "Either he's had special-forces military training — in a rescue situation you cut through those laces to get the shoes off — or he is a man of high quality, with high-quality shoes. Either way, you've got to take care."

I do everything I've been taught. I pop the tin, I slap the wax, I special-sauce, I drop the cloth, I spin the brushes, I straight arrow, I teepee, I do the twist. Then I look up at this high-quality customer, and I ask if he wants to see my knockers. □