



On The Scent of Memories

by Lou Beckerman

If remembering is a chair that is hard to sit still in, then forgetting is the chair that is cruelly whisked away as you unsuspectingly go to sit in it; the shock of endlessly falling through nothingness while the school joker laughs.

I prefer to take the discomfort of the chair thanks – however thorny. Sitting and fidgeting and wriggling and squirming, I breathe deep and bathe in the bittersweet, the acrid, the fragrant, the noxious, the rancid, the aromatic and the intense and timeless scent of memories.

BITTER-SWEET

I was assaulted once, stepping out of a plane at Tel Aviv; ambushed by the heady mix of heat and scent which hurled itself at me after five hours of inescapable bland air-conditioning. It slapped me in the face – surprising and stinging all at once.

And I was set-about by layers of irony. This all-pervading, sweet-smelling blossom of the orange tree would develop into sharp zesty peel and pith before we could reach back in for the sweet heart of the fruit.

I was nineteen, embarking on a year's adventure, and naively unaware of the incongruity of such sweetness in the air of an embittered and divided land.

ACRID

Some people come to mind in an unexpected and fleeting moment, as you catch their fragrance in the air. I smell exhaust fumes and there's Rupert.

I don't know when we started to call her Rupert, and I never can recall her as Fran. She wore a favourite Rupert Bear woollen scarf - yellow and black window-pane check; had a deep sexy voice and she was my best friend at art school.

I travelled on a 'gap year' then took a job and was earning. She'd married and was a gorgeous mum to her baby girl, but an unfulfilment lurked. Perhaps Rupert Bear's fantastic exploits in faraway lands were enticing her.

We kept loosely in-touch from our respective worlds over the years. I sometimes think about a picture of her at thirty-seven, taken at my wedding, and she looks beautiful and happy. Serene even. Or was that for my benefit? Three years later she meticulously planned her exit.

Soon after, I swear, I'm suffocating in the all-pervasive smothering smell of carbon monoxide in my face, mouth, and inside my nostrils. It enveloped me in its leaden pungency. Wherever I went - inside, outside, work, play, I shallow-breathed the oxygen-blocking assassin for around a week.

Make of it what you will. It's never happened since.

INTENSE AND TIMELESS

I'd barely ever been inside a church - it wasn't my tradition. The 'gig' venue was Westminster Cathedral which seats up to three thousand.

I was twenty-four. At short notice I'd been asked to join a gospel folk group whose vocalist would be unable to perform at their upcoming inaugural concert.

We arrived to set-up one autumnal afternoon. And once again I was mugged. This time by the punch of an intense odour utterly invasive, strange and exotic. Resin incense of benzoin, frankincense and myrrh - the ancient, mysterious and timeless smell of prayer - had seeped into and clung onto every brick, marble and mosaic; wood, fabric and carpet.

They came that evening and filled the cathedral. And I managed to sing my heart out despite the unaccustomed pungency.

FRAGRANT

Even in my lightest and coolest attire, I, accustomed to colder climes, was over-heated and sweaty much of the time in Rajasthan, India. I was attending a Brahma Kumaris 'Peace of Mind' Raja Yoga retreat.

One particular iridescent Brahma Kumaris sister, robed in her wafting-white, had about her a continuous fresh fragrance of cool rosewater, as though forever having just stepped out of a tranquil perfumed bath. I wondered whether this was a side-effect of a life in meditation. The practice did much for me - but never that.

RANCID

Life as a jazz singer was something I could contemplate only when smoking was eventually banned in venues. Within me was not one iota of Billie or Ella grit.

Al, my dad, played sax and violin most of his life in every smoke-filled atmosphere. He would roll his own with Rizla papers and tips in a pocket-sized magic machine. I can recall, as a child, hearing the sharp snap as a perfectly rounded white baton emerged, though I have no conscious memory of any odour associated with him (a chain-smoker - I am told). But then I have so few memories of our eleven shared years.

My legacy - an instantaneous lung sensitivity to nicotine - not only to second-hand inhalation, but to anyone with skin, hair, clothes and breath impregnated with rancid smoke.

Bizarrely, at one time, my work involved helping smokers to quit. I always knew if they were fibbing...

In contrast, I am completely content to linger and deeply inhale while, at a snail's pace, passing café doorways in Amsterdam, enticed by the earthy aroma of cannabis.

NOXIOUS

T. was impossibly smug whenever there was an electricity power-cut. In the darkness our house alone was ablaze with light. He adored gas - he'd grown up with it.

There had once been a cylindrical gas-holder in the large plot which lay in a deep hollow in the landscape just beside us. 'The Bend' - the house we'd settled in, had been built almost one hundred years previously by the Gas Board for the gas yard foreman and his family.

In each room we located the points where gas lights had operated. We found Sugg & Co, the original lighting company, and restored the bygone trappings and gorgeous globes.

The soft dim flickering yellow glow and the continuous hiss felt Dickensian (however did he write...). For me, the smell when a pilot light blew out or when gas escaped from a leaky pipe here or there, was troubling and occasionally headache-provoking.

But T. was oblivious and said I had a bionic nose. It's true - my nose knows...

Perhaps the noxious fumes were also redolent of the thick black rubber mask spewing out a putrid chemical cosh for childhood fillings. Curiously it was taken as read then that teeth would decay, and that dentists were to be paid for each filling performed...

SWEETLY AROMATIC

There is a whiff of sweetly aromatic decay - like humus - which pervades the air sometimes. It smells of both life and death. Nobody ever mentions it, and it occurs only on a particular sort of day. I once caught it as it wafted over the road that runs alongside the burial ground. And again, sometimes, there - in that place itself.

I used to tell a joke to friends if they asked where T. was when he'd locked himself away at the piano for days on end. I said that spending his time composing was better than decomposing. Not such a joke these days, although - if he could - T. would think it funnier now. Perhaps he does. He loved irony and absurdity.