

NERVE CLASSICS

## True Stories: Scents and Sensibility

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I was born without a sense of smell. The term for this is anosmia. It can be temporary, but for me, it's permanent — a congenital, hopeless case. My parents thought I was faking it for years, until they noticed I made no attempts to hold my breath when we drove past meat-packing plants or road-kill skunks.

I share the specifics of my anosmia on a need-to-know basis; it's confusing enough to have, even worse to have to explain to someone. There are schools that teach you how to live without sight or sound; there's sensitivity training for politically correct interaction with the blind and deaf. But if you're anosmic, you have to figure it out for yourself — even then, sometimes you need help. A few days ago I'd been microwaving my delicious, economical dinner of choice — microwave popcorn. I'd grabbed the bag, steam curling from it in wispy shapes, and put my face too close to the hot corn air. I'd inhaled a lungful before I realized it was smoke, not steam. The kitchen was hazy; the fire alarm went off. Just when I started yanking at the window above our sink, my roommate clambered in.

"What are you doing?" she screamed. I had to apologize and explain. "Really? You can't smell? How do you eat? How do you live?"

My roommate, Cecilia, is a lusty woman, perhaps the only truly lusty woman I've ever met. She's from Nicaragua. She has a profound love for each of her senses. Each night, she performs her dinner ritual. She sits at our little table, pours a glass of wine, lights a scented candle (cinnamon or honey rum), and savors a soup or burrito she's made entirely from scratch. Catching her in full sniff — eyes closed, breathing in the lushness of the air — is like catching her mid-orgasm.

I've dreaded telling her about my anosmia, though it explains why she needs an entire pantry for her cookware and I need only a little drawer. I do like food, especially food with interesting textures, and I have a sense of taste. I know my sweet, my bitter, my salty, my sour. It's a sense of flavor I lack. My boyfriend Josh and I once sampled limited-edition, coffee-flavored Kit-Kat bars. He said his was tasty, but I couldn't tell the difference. I sensed the chocolate base, but the flavor of coffee was something only a nose could recognize.

So I should have known that a weekend getaway to wine country wouldn't be my ideal escape. Still, Josh and I have decided to upgrade from Kit-Kats to an extensive tour and tasting. We venture north, escaping the bus-fume-and-briefcase life of San Francisco for a slow, wonderfully drunk day in Napa. Our guide, an old man named Leroy, tilts his cowboy hat back to stick the whole of his nose into the mouth of a goblet, eyeing the dozens of couples staring at him. It's clear we're all novices — none of us has ever thought to sniff a drink before consuming it.

After inhaling deeply, Leroy clears his throat and says, "Everyone, hold your noses and take a drink of your wine!" I don't bother holding my nose, but I watch everyone else as they do. Cruel frowns form as they sip. "Doesn't taste very good, does it?" Leroy barks. "Kinda like stale club soda?" Everyone nods and releases their nostrils, back to sipping flavors in a way I'll never understand.

"What about sex?" Cecilia asked me, as if sex is anything like food. But maybe it is; she's a constant devourer of men. Cecilia doesn't call boyfriends boyfriends. She calls them lovers. "I don't think I could ever be attracted to a man if I couldn't smell him," she says. "Smell is just so...animal. Sex has to be animal."

Is my nose the reason I can't say the word "lover" without irony? I don't think I've ever been animal about anything in my life. Josh tells me I'm too tense in bed. He always encourages me to, "Lose yourself, lose yourself." But I can't — I'm thinking about my abs in the moonlight or the discomfort of his small sweat drops in my eye. In fact, I can't recall a single moment in my life — in bed or otherwise — when I've been swept up, overwhelmed, a little faint or weak in the knees. I can't think of anything. Am I too neurotic, or is it the schnoz?

I do use my senses when it comes to passion: I like to listen to my boyfriend play the guitar, or watch him dance. Smell isn't everything: I love his face, I get lost in his eyes, I revel in the crush of his arms against me. I adore his mind. But when we're on the sofa at night, being lulled to sleep by the blue light of the television, he lays his head on my shoulder and says, "I love the way you smell." The look on his face when he says this is too serene, too sure of itself. It reminds me of the way he drinks his wine now, like he knows something I don't. Like I shouldn't even bother.

I worry about this, as I do about most everything, and speak to my friend Michelle on the phone. She's not from Nicaragua, but Nebraska. She is only mildly lusty. "Does smell really matter?" I ask her. She tells me that she and her boyfriend are "hair smellers." Her boyfriend has started using her shampoo so he can smell her hair, always. "I also love the way he smells above his lips and below his nose. I only ever smell him there when we kiss. I think it must freak him out sometimes when we're kissing and I'm, like, inhaling vehemently."

I like to torture myself, I guess — I ask all my friends about the ways I can't know the world. Sarah, a lithe young Georgian, says she wears her boyfriend's shirt whenever he's gone. "His smell can bring me to my knees," she says. "Ever been in a fight with your boyfriend, but you get a whiff of his scent, and then you just want to hug?" Alas, I seem to be lacking my primal just-forget-it button.

Josh says I could give Woody Allen a run for his money. "You don't need to analyze everything," he tells me over dinner that night. But at least Woody Allen has a working sinus cavity. Josh stabs at a massive burrito with a fork, and like he does with everything — whisky before he drinks, ink before he draws, me before he nuzzles — he puts the morsel to his nose before he eats it. "Just live your life," he tells me, like it's as easy as breathing.

Is it the schnoz? For every action I perform, I always have a novel-length monologue about it in my head. I question the hell out of anything, from turning left at a one-way stop to putting my arm around my boyfriend's waist. It's always been a big obstacle in my love life. I'm incapable of flirting without mentally debating all the ways my attempts at seduction might be interpreted: as loving, or silly, or stupid, or ironic, or whorish, or rude. Josh doesn't understand why I can't let go, why I'm never swept away. Why can't I just kiss him? Why have I never been able to just kiss anybody? Is it impossible for me to appreciate hormones? Is it because my primal self — my lizard brain, my animal nature — has gone awry?

"Aren't you ever just turned on?" Josh asks me. We're both sitting half-dressed on the sofa. I have my nose in a book.

"I guess," I tell him, "but not right now." I'm re-reading *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. It's about a man named Grenouille with a sense of smell so strong he can walk through black nights without stumbling. One day he discovers a scent, and its description is something I wish I could appreciate on more than a linguistic level: "The odor came rolling down the rue de Seine like a ribbon... This scent was...like a piece of thin, shimmering silk... like pastry soaked in honey-sweet milk."

Grenouille's sense of smell — and his attraction to the girl who is the source of the honey-milk scent — are so strong that he can't stop himself from killing her to distill it. I can't imagine this kind of passion, but I long to feel something so primal. I need to need something so much I could murder it. Forget about sex; what about love? I look up at Josh, who wants to kiss me, who sniffs my glands (the armpit, the lap). Am I releasing some sort of signal? I can't be — I don't feel like kissing; I want to read and continue to do so. I'm in control and, at the moment, Josh isn't — he fingers my hair, my neck. Will he do this to me: smash me, grind me away? Has this process already begun?

Everywhere I go, my world is stale club soda to everyone else's two-hundred-dollar reserve Pinot. Navigating the crowds of San Francisco, I don't pause before the perfumery, the flower shop; I can't sense the homeless man in a black quilt at night until I've tripped over him. I don't know what it's like to walk into a Chinese bakery like my friend Alex, who stops short, tasting the air, who takes a deep breath with her whole body and says, "Jesus, I wish I could live here forever." A Russian stranger sidles up to me at the BART station. He has the most peaceful look on his face when he tells me, "You smell just like my daughter did before her wedding." And now, I remember my father, five years ago at my mother's funeral, sitting in a church pew, grasping the petals he'd snatched roughly from each arrangement. He clutched roses, lilies, little purple blooming things I've never known the name of, and pressed each bloom into his face, weeping and weeping as though I could not see him.

And my boyfriend. After a long day of wine-tasting, I wash my face with an exfoliating scrub made of ocean salt, limes, coconut, grapefruit, violets, and vodka. I crawl into bed with Josh, our lips tinged purple from Merlot we've drunk straight from the bottle. He's half-asleep, he puts his nose to my cheek and inhales. He smiles without knowing it. I want to ask him what love is. I want to tell him the story of my friend Jenny, who knew she had to end it with her husband when his smell no longer pleased her. I want to ask him how to be sure of your feelings if they're all in your head and not your body; I want to ask if these things I think I feel could ever be called feelings. Instead, I go with my gut: I wrap myself around him and try to sleep.

*This article originally appeared in Nerve's True Stories.*

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