



Personal notes: Sharon in the *Pretty Peach* days of 1968; in love in 1978; looking 'very *Dallas*' in 1981; in Florence 1986 and aged 40 in 2000 – plus a few of her favourite fragrances: *Fidji*, *Charlie*, *Chanel No 19* and *Jo Malone's Lime, Basil and Mandarin*

My life in perfume

Our sense of smell gives us a fast-track connection to our memories, says **Sharon Parsons** – who time-travels back to her past with her most evocative fragrances

While clearing out my parents' loft recently I came across a pale yellow presentation box that made my heart beat just a little faster. Inside nestled a slender phial of perfume, almost empty. I took it out, slowly removed the cap, and tentatively sniffed... oh, goodness! Like a genie uncorked from its bottle, the scent – *Fidji* by Guy Laroche – whooshed up, heady and sensual. Suddenly it was 1978 and I, wearing a peasant-style top, was perched by the *Trimphone* in the hall, willing my first love – who had bought me that very fragrance – to call...

It's no surprise: while our other senses have to process information, smell is

fast-tracked directly to a part of the brain called the limbic system, which controls emotion, mood and memory, making it incredibly powerful. When we experience a 'new' smell, our brain makes an instant connection between that and memory – which is why a scent conjures up the past so evocatively.

MAGIC POTIONS

My own olfactory awakening began early: my mum was an Avon lady in the 1960s and 1970s, and I used to love

helping her sort the box of customers' orders every month. The scented potions and lotions all had mysterious, glamorous names – *Occur*, *Rapture*, *Topaze* and *Hawaiian White Ginger*. My favourite was *Pretty Peach*: even now, I recall the thrill of dusting on its silky powder with the soft downy puff.

Just before I hit my teens, I was allowed a dab of *Helena Rubinstein's Apple Blossom* – a gift from my aunt deemed suitable for someone my age – swiftly followed by *Goya's* neroli-based ▶

Aqua Manda. But, to this day, nothing remains more evocative than Flair by Yardley: the merest sniff swiftly time-travels me back to those first tentative, tongue-tied dates with boys drenched in Brut aftershave.

A plethora of 'it' perfumes arrived on the 1970s scene. There was YSL's Rive Gauche, Babe by Fabergé, Mary Quant's Havoc and Charlie by Revlon. I even flirted with Tramp by Lenthéric in an effort to emulate its promised *joie de vivre*... though I never quite came to terms with the name!

The 'power perfumes' of the 1980s – Dior's Poison, Obsession by Calvin Klein and Giorgio Beverly Hills, with its yellow-and-white striped packaging (and a scent so overpowering it was banned in some US restaurants) – muscled in briefly, but we didn't get on. I preferred the freshness of Ô de Lancôme and Prescriptives' Calyx. Even now, Chanel No 19 makes me wistful because I associate it with lonely Sundays nursing a broken heart.

SEDUCTIVE SPRITZ

It was in my mid-twenties on a trip to Florence that I found The One in a tiny backstreet *profumeria*. Envol by Ted Lapidus (meaning 'flight') with its deep-blue top was fresh, mossy – and me. It was love at first spritz and I wore it religiously for several years until it was discontinued. Even now, locked in my memory bank, I can detect a lingering trace of its delicious scent.

My career in women's magazines gave me the chance to trial all sorts of different scents. Often, before an after-work date or big night out, I rooted around in the Aladdin's cave of the beauty cupboard to find a sample of something to wear.

Maybe L'Eau d'Issey by Issey Miyake, Venezia by Laura Biagiotti, Chanel's Allure and, of course, the unisex appeal of Calvin Klein's CK One. Most of those perfumes – some worn

only fleetingly – still bring back fond memories. Although I must admit there are some I associate with my working life that I can't bear: a particularly vicious boss wore a 'signature' scent

Pulse points

Readers remember poignant perfumes



Madame Rochas

'It reminds me of wearing cheesecloth skirts and gypsy tops. I loved the bottle, too!'
Claire, Kent



4711

'My mum had a big bottle of the eau de cologne and last year I bought a tiny bottle to reminisce.' Mary, Sussex



Anaïs Anaïs

'It takes me back to my first job and going for a picnic with the basket and crockery I got free with my second bottle.'
Mags, Lincs



Calèche

'My first perfume, given to me by a friend of my mum's when I was 16. I wore it until I was 50!'
Penny, Devon



Loulou

'I wore it on my wedding day 25 years ago. I loved the blue angular bottle.'
Rayne, Bristol

(I won't name it, or her!) that still causes my throat to constrict should I ever catch a whiff of it; another well-known fragrance I briefly wore invariably

reminds me of a stressful job that caused me nothing but sleepless nights and gnawing worry.

When I got married for the first time in my early thirties, like many women I cast aside all

previous perfume passions to find my 'wedding day scent', eventually settling on the classic Givenchy III. The marriage ended some years later but, occasionally, I allow myself a sniff when

'I FOUND The One IN A TINY BACKSTREET profumeria. IT WAS love AT FIRST SPRITZ'

I wander through a cosmetics hall and I'm immediately transported back to that bright April day of my wedding.

On holiday in New York in the mid-1990s, I discovered Antonia's Flowers in Bloomingdale's and completely fell for its crisp, freesia-scented bouquet: to this day – thanks to Space NK who stock it over here – it's one I still reach for as soon as spring arrives.

FRESH DIRECTION

It wasn't until my 40th birthday that I finally decided it was time for the Big One: the sophisticated, sensuous Chanel No 5. But guess what? While I loved smelling it on everyone else, it just didn't sit easily on my pulse points – it seemed to wear me, rather than the other way around, and I soon found my way back to the green or citrus scents that I realise, looking back, have always been the preferred staples of my perfume wardrobe.

These days, for instance, I tend to favour Jo Malone's Lime, Basil & Mandarin or a spritz of Acqua Di Parma Colonia. My favourite 'green' scent of all, though, is the uplifting Aqua Allegoria Herba Fresca by Guerlain. I first bought this fragrance the second time I got married, as we jetted off on our honeymoon, and, 10 years on, it instantly reminds me of that wonderful time in our life.

YOUNG DREAMS

The other day, my 15-year-old niece Holly wafted into her grandparents' sitting room in a cloud of heady perfume. 'It's Vera Wang Rock Princess,' she revealed nonchalantly, when I asked her what she was wearing. Years from now, no doubt, a single whiff of this dramatic fruity-floral concoction will return her in an instant to this pivotal time in her life, standing on the edge of womanhood and independence.

For that's the extraordinary thing about fragrance: it draws us to another place, tugging at emotions and sometimes heartstrings, evoking memories and associations – some of which may have lain dormant for years. And yet, really, they never leave us.

Tell us which fragrance holds treasured memories for you – write or email us at the address on page 13 ♦