

# PERFUME HATERS

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TEXT BY NEIL CHAPMAN

In June 2002, Mary-Anne Arsenault, a player for a Canadian curling team, was on the rink mid-game when she was suddenly assailed by a sweet, pernicious odour that stopped her airwaves, had her head spinning, and sent her crashing down onto the ice. Unable to breathe and hyperventilating, the athlete was hospitalised with an acute form of chemical sensitivity that she claimed had been caused by a fragrance an opposing team member had been wearing (which just happened to be the aptly named Poison by Christian Dior). As a result of this incident and its ensuing publicity, the Canadian Curling Association issued a ban on all perfume for its players.

On July 30th 2009, 34 office workers at the Fort Worth Texas branch of Bank of America were also sent to hospital when two people in the same department began coughing and complaining of dizziness (it seems the other 32 became affected only after the general announcement that anyone experiencing similar symptoms could leave the building...). What was at first thought to be a toxic outbreak or, worse, a terrorist attack, turned out in fact to be a reaction to a perfume. A worker at the bank had sprayed on her signature scent and was, I imagine, mortified by the outcome—the requirement of artificial respirators is not what you usually expect when applying fragrance.

Whether or not the product in question—whose identity was not released—does in fact contain dangerous allergens, or whether it was an outbreak of mass psychogenic illness (or severe office bullying) we do not know. There is little doubt, however, that following the incident there will have been some edict prohibiting fragrancin in the workzone.

The above cases may seem bizarre to the average British person accustomed to smelling different fragrances in everyday life and very possibly using them him/herself. Yet there is, in fact, a rising tide of smell-haters worldwide who would have us banned from scenting ourselves at all; a movement of zealous chemophobes wanting to reduce the kaleidoscopic colours of our olfactory world to an anodyne, odourless nothing...

Halifax, Nova Scotia: (not coincidentally, Mary-Anne's hometown) was, in fact, in 2000, the first city in the world to enact a complete ban on all perfume. From designer fragrance to shampoos and conditioners, from deodorants to hairspray, the wearing of all cosmetic fragrances has been prohibited in most indoor public places, including offices, libraries, hospitals,

classrooms, courts and the transportation system.

According to the Seattle Times, university students have been suspended from class for wearing body spray, and one old lady was even thrown off a city bus for smelling too 'sweet' (one can imagine the scene as the poor dear is hauled off, screaming '...but it's Chanel!'). Even doughnut stores have apparently been ordered to make their premises unscented. Meanwhile, in the town of Shutesbury, Massachusetts, town meetings are these days segregated into three distinct sections to avoid disturbing those hypersensitive to odours: prime of place reserved for those who proudly have never used scented products; a second-class category for those who sometimes wear scent but not on the day of the meeting (the implication being: it lingers); and a third specially labelled miscreant zone for those who 'forgot' about the town's fragrance ban and wore perfume – do they have to sit with bags over their heads? On her official website, councillor Ziporah Hildebrandt, a fervent perfume-hater, corrects those doubting that their scent has ever caused anyone bother. On the contrary, 'Your fragrance may have already affected someone so much that she or he has trouble speaking, thinking, taking action or even remaining awake and conscious,' she intones. Special measures recommended to ensure a pleasant odour-free environment for all employees include, therefore, showering with baking soda (it makes you more thoroughly odourless than soap) as well as washing clothes with the same. Those worried about reeking follically from residual odour from hair products when visiting a fragrance-free environment should wear a soda-washed hat to reduce the risk of upsetting an ultrasensitive worker. And if all else fails, and a smell seeps through: 'Leave if you sense that your presence may be a problem.'

With the rules currently in place, however, your best intentions may not be enough with people this hypernosmic: in some offices it is even forbidden to come into contact with 'unnatural' odours, including those picked up by handling faxes and paper run through machines. The mere detection of these chemicals by any suffering party could, we assume, have them coughing and spluttering, paralysed from the neck down. And of course, if you have been to the petrol station prior to driving to work and have just filled your tank, you can forget being allowed in the office.

The Halifax ban in fact has even more sinister implications. At one city college, a seventeen-year-old boy reportedly went into class with deodorant (Aqua Velva) and a hair gel called Dippity Doo. The combined smell was so horrifying to his teacher (who complained of headaches and vomiting) that she pressed for assault charges. Fortunately (for me at least, a future multi-convicted felon if this ever becomes widespread), the legal ramifications of such cases, which are on the increase, are currently too hazy and amorphous to implement. This was evidenced by events in Honolulu, where the Hawaiian authorities in September 2009 had been attempting to pass a law where anyone convicted of smelling offensively on the city's buses would have been fined up to \$500 or given a six-month jail term. Legal definitions of what constitutes 'smelly', as well as accusations of trying to discriminate against the poor (not to mention issues of race) have put the bill on the back burner for the time being. Nevertheless, the mere possibility of this fascistic rise in anti-scent hysteria taking hold of the wider populace has some of the perfumed blogosphere, myself included, feeling nervous.

Naturally, not all the inhabitants of these scentless places have acquiesced without protest to these draconian measures, but it seems that the non-scented environment has by now, for the general populace, become the norm. Some have described Halifax as 'smelling like Big Brother', and wonder what else is coming. Will flowers such as lilies, bluebells and narcissus be next? (After all, the natural, narcotic chemical makeup of such flowers are known to cause headaches and nausea in concentration.) Could a bouquet incorporating these blooms constitute therefore an infringement of a smell-hater's civil rights? And what about food and drink? Couldn't the breath of someone guzzling on a popular sugary beverage, artificially flavoured, coloured and sweetened, constitute a fragrance? It is very hard to see where the line can be drawn with something as hazy and subjective as smell.

Though it might seem tempting to dismiss the above as simply a few cases of a small group of oddballs and their obsession with 'rights' gone too far, the Orwellian blanching-out of our olfactory space is not limited to litigious North America. Much as I love the country where I have lived for the last fifteen years, Japan is probably the least likely country for a committed scent lover and perfume collector to settle in. Not only do Japanese people on the whole not wear perfume, a majority seem to actively dislike it. And, as in Nova Scotia, there are a growing number of people claiming extreme sensitivity to scent: smell bans, almost as stringent as those in Canada, are

being urged in various establishments. Chiba, Okayama and Hiroshima prefectures and 21 other city and town governments across the land are currently staging public awareness campaigns in how not to offend others by the 'selfish wearing of strong' scents. And in a country where conformity is key, you can be sure that the idea will spread. My own company, a group of preparatory schools, also has a ban on scent – a decree I find almost impossible to heed and one I keep trying to circumvent surreptitiously. I had to learn my lesson the hard way when students were literally screaming for me to open the window when I once misguidedly decided to wear Givenchy's modern men's oriental, Pi, for instance. Having received a couple of verbal warnings by my bosses, I now try to limit myself to light, modern scents at much lower dosage, though I have to confess that the urge within me to resist is often quite fierce.

Why then, we must ask, are there such extreme reactions to something designed, since ancient times, to give us pleasure?

In Japan, the reasons are partly cultural, stemming from a history of being forced to be constantly attuned to others and to not stand out, with one of the best-known proverbs being 'the nail that sticks out must be hammered down'. The culture of self-effacement prevalent in Japan thus naturally inclines people towards being unscented, and strong perfumes (and of course strong natural body odours) are automatically very much frowned upon (though there is a significant number of people who do rebel, and wear fragrance anyway, and recently I feel they have been increasing). However, in general, the mere idea that you might imagine you have the right to stink up someone's private space seems outrageously inconsiderate in the context of the Japanese train, and people will quite unselfconsciously move seats, or, if this isn't possible, stopper up their nostrils if the person sitting next to them is deemed to smell offensive. I have watched middle aged women sit through whole train journeys with looks of horror on their faces, ostentatiously demonstrating their disgust with little Hermès hankies wrapped tightly round their nose as the snoring businessman sleeps, stinking, open-mouthed and oblivious.

In recent times though, two developments in Japanese society have led to a rise in 'odour anxiety' that borders on the hysterical: an increase in (auto)bromidrophobia; the hatred of body odours and the terror of your own (real or imagined) body odour offending others; and gradual changes in the national diet that have resulted in very real changes in how the Japanese actually smell. The two run in a tightly woven vicious circle. The essentially isolationist Japanese, like most cultures, have long considered foreigners (and all other ethnicities) to

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be much stronger smelling than themselves. And with their history of group-oriented culture, as well as a long standing tradition of personal hygiene and cleanliness (ritual bathing at hot springs and so on) it is no surprise that we Europeans, with our heritage of body stench and roses and musk to then cover it up, are viewed with a certain level of suspicion. With Queen Elizabeth I washing once a month whether 'she needed it or not', it could be argued that much of European perfumery is in fact simply a great cover-up operation to conceal the stench billowing up from skirt and pantaloons. And as a person acutely sensitive to smell, I can bear testimony to the fact that by and large, the claim to relative odourlessness is true. It is enough that Japanese deodorants are famously not sufficiently strong for us Westerners (who are forced to import our own brands from home), but can be further borne out by riding a rush hour train in the sweltering heat of summer, when the average British person would have quite simply melted into a pool of grime and sweat. Even in this situation, a large proportion of Japanese do not seem to smell at all, even up close. That said, with the encroaching westernisation of the Japanese diet, which now incorporates much more meat and dairy into the traditional staples of rice, vegetables and fish, a BO smell more akin to the meat-pie taboo familiar in the west has become more prominent. Those afflicted (often unmarried 'salarymen' living on their unhealthy diets of Chinese meat dumplings and pork noodles) thus stick out all the more as pariahs in the odourless soup of daily life.

Traditionally, the Japanese haven't worn deodorant, for the simple reason that it wasn't necessary. But smell is equivalent to filth in many people's thinking here, and the new existence and awareness of body odour has led to a huge increase in profits for deodorant manufacturers, who are capitalising on people's fears. One successful advertising campaign, for example, features slender Japanese women lifting their armpits up to a jolly Caucasian lollipop lady who sniffs and gives her the thumbs up, the implication being that Europeans, long versed in BO, know when an armpit is safe.

The increase in smell phobias is also giving rise to a whole group of mushrooming industries to specifically cater to the problem. There are a number of clinics in Tokyo and other big cities that perform operations to actually remove the specific glands in the armpit that cause smelly bacteria; over 30,000 people a year are said to opt for this procedure to lay their fears to rest. This coincides with a rise in manufacturers selling anti-bacterial and deodorised underwear, shirts and socks, as well, in the last five years or so, a huge increase in the amount of fabric conditioners such as Downy, and domestic

variants thereof, to leave your clothes smelling day-long cosy and homely. If this isn't enough, for those truly neurotic individuals who also cannot bear their own emissions, there are special pills available that destroy the smell of excrement, leaving instead a peachy waft that is deemed less evil. For those truly committed to erasing their presence from society, various odourbuster websites are on the rise as people scramble to find ways to make themselves ever less present to the noses of those sitting near them on the train.

We have then, here, a contradictory double whammy of smell terror. On the one hand are certain Japanese and their fear of producing foul odours from their bodies and an ensuing desire to mask them with gently-scented cosmetics, and on the other a contrasting horror of anything but natural in pockets of North America, where the chemically ultrasensitive get a migraine from stepping inside a building of people.

Where does all this smell-hating madness stem from? Phobias of emitting any detectable odour or being forced to smell another person surely originate in the fact that many modernised environments have become ever more deodorised

to the point of smelling of almost nothing. Human odours are therefore more noticeable as sanitation has taken over and the backdrop of odours masking them has been eradicated.

In towns, what must once have been a fascinating mingling of smells, sweet and foul – of people, food, bodies, perfumes, breath – has been by and large reduced to the olfactory drone of the shopping centre and beings in fabric-conditioned clothes drifting by. Clean, odourless, or the olfactory version thereof is the key. Of course no one would in all seriousness want to return to the dirty, malodorous and unsanitary environments of history. But surely there is a limit to how much we can, and should, think of any smell emitting from another person as an invasion of personal space, an abuse of civil rights.

And isn't it possible that by trying to blot out our smells we lose something of our common humanity? The obsession with hygiene in places such as North America and Scandinavia has been posited by some socio-anthropologists as a one of the factors in their unusually high divorce rates: as we strip our bodies of their smell, the thinking goes, we lose an important part of human social bonding.

So is it possible for us to return to our 'natural state'? The BO question is a tricky one. In his *Lost Worlds: What Have We Lost And Where Did It Go?*, writer Michael Bywater bemoans, 'There was once a time when people smelt of people. Now we take one, two or, in extreme cases, three baths or showers a day without thinking much about it'. But, he says, 'There are

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plenty of people alive who can remember when bath night was a weekly occurrence, yet, strangely do not recall daily life as being unendurable because of the stench'. Interestingly, it was for this precise reason that at a job interview for a teaching position in Recife, Brazil, it was stated very strongly to me by the company that for British people they had very strict rules on bathing. Many Brazilian students simply couldn't bear the unhygienic, malodorous British teachers who, despite the hot weather, didn't shower regularly, and all employees were obligated, contractually, to sign a statement saying we would shower at least twice a day. This illustrates quite clearly, I think, to what extent notions of what is acceptable in terms of smell really do vary between cultures.

But back to Britain. From a nostalgic point of view, imagining my parents' generation in the sixties and seventies and their bath night; remembering the smell of Brylcreem-tainted combs in our bathroom at home, and the comforting, natural smell of my parents at the end of the day, I can understand to some extent how Bywater feels. And I can fully empathise with those perfume haters who simply prefer the natural smell of a human being in all his or her natural glory, unadorned with perfume (though I do think that most of these people have simply never smelled a really good one and could probably be converted...).

Having said all this, I spent last summer in Berlin and I was really quite surprised by the inordinately large number of people who clearly were not wearing deodorant in the hot August weather and didn't care in the least about their human stink. I found it strangely fascinating in spite of the peremptory, socially conditioned superficial reactions of disgust, and needless to say it was a very refreshing change from being in Japan. There is something that induces great feelings of tenderness, not to say sexual arousal, in the bodily smells of people; strangers; of those you love; and of others (even my Japanese barber obviously needs a deodorant, yet there is something compelling in his smell). In all honesty, the sexiest scent probably is that of nakedness.

The question is, do we want to sense these intimate odours on all the people around us? In a crowded city such as Tokyo (where the rush hour trains have to be experienced to be believed), where there is a certain 'love-me-for-who-I-am' appeal to this question, we humans all mingling in a melting pot of natural odour, I think it is, fortunately or unfortunately, too late. We have already been conditioned by society to deodorise and purge our bodies of smell: the odour of unwashed bodies, hair and mouths is no longer acceptable in the public sphere and we have become sensitised to anything that breaks this rule. Smell is powerful and we are powerless to fight our prejudices;

how we react is instinctive, instantaneous. Before we have even tried to cerebrally correct any prejudice or snobbery we might have when experiencing someone's personal smell, we have felt the emotion already: judgement, repulsion/attraction in its most primitive, instant form, and I think we all have our own personal dislikes in this regard - I for one cannot tolerate the smell of lank, greasy hair, and feel instant animosity towards the owners of these sordid strands. I actually feel rage if a person with unwashed hair brushes by me in public. And for me, people with catarrh or tooth decay should be legally bound to chew the strongest peppermint gum, and arrested for failing to do so. I don't believe I am entirely alone in this regard, and given the intensity of most people to unwarranted natural smells, it is probably safe to say that it is too late for us to return to a world of unbridled armpits and crotches.

As for Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Disorder and the preponderance of harmful chemicals in our environment, this clearly is a genuine problem for modern society to resolve. Those with the condition do genuinely suffer, and they have my sympathy. Yet because a small percentage of the population is

## THE SMELL OF BRYLCREAM-TAINTED COMBS

affected by something, does that automatically mean that all others who enjoy it should be prevented from doing so? I myself suffer from tinnitus, and sudden loud noises, particularly from loud speakers, blaring public sudden service announcements or drilling on the streets give me extreme discomfort. I wouldn't however, suggest that no maintenance should ever be carried out, nor that the railway station should stop announcing the arrival of a coming train. As for the argument of personal space and the invasion thereof, if you are against perfume simply because you don't like it, then this is a whole other matter. Living in society automatically means being exposed to other people, and their differences. Taking this logic to my own personal extreme, I might then ban all advertising if given the chance, as I see it as visual and mental pollution. The same goes for message T-shirts, which are an involuntary distraction and irritation (this is one of the wonderful benefits of living in a country where you can't read the language, and I am not alone in this view).

And what of music and the everyday noises we are subjected to? I consider every Oasis song I hear a personal affront, but would never campaign to ban one. Naturally, when we are discussing something to which sufferers have a physical adverse reaction, it is a more serious matter. But to put the primary blame on perfume is, in my opinion, somewhat ludicrous (particularly when considering the stringent tests in place to ensure the safety of each ingredient in fragrances, if we are to believe the perfume companies).

We are not living in Eden (which itself would have

contained a good few natural toxins). Our environment is flush with chemicals. I believe perfume is blamed by MCSO sufferers simply because it is more immediately detectable, the obvious scapegoat. Sick Building Syndrome, triggered by volatile organic compounds and other chemicals used in architectural materials, paints and other substances, is a form of MCSO, as is having allergic reactions to synthetic fabrics, plastics and pesticides. The only difference is that we cannot smell them. Taken to its logical conclusion, were we to insist on 'pure' air, with no traces of irritant volatile molecules, there would be no cars or planes, no washing powders or shampoos, and we would be living in grass huts, provided, of course, you were not a hay-fever sufferer (there are a huge number of allergens in the natural plant world too, as the multitudes of mask-wearing Japanese in cedar-pollen season will testify). And what about those allergic to animal fur? Should we cull all the world's cats? The fact is, that unless we live in a fiberglass igloo like Carol White, the MCSO sufferer played by Julianne Moore in Todd Haynes' brilliantly sardonic film *Safe*, sealed off from all odours and all contaminants (and thus from the world), we cannot escape.

And I wouldn't want to. As a person who experiences such intense pleasure from his sense of smell on a daily basis, I would personally find a neutered-out scentscape where no detectable smells were allowed so depressingly unlivable that I would surely turn into an olfactory Bin Laden. Terrorism would quite simply ensue. And if forced to live in Big Brother Nova Scotia, I would undoubtedly be sentenced to life in prison there without parole, for being congenitally unable to resist.

**Neil Chapman has been smelling, wearing, collecting, and obsessing over perfume for almost 25 years, witnessing first hand the transformation of the perfume world, from the age of "big house" releases to the current diversification into high street, luxury, and niche. He has been writing about perfume for ten years in Japan, where he currently resides, teaches, and trawls the Tokyo flea markets for discarded vintage gems to add to his ever-growing perfume collection. He is particularly interested in cultural differences regarding smell, in the classics of perfumery's Golden Age, and natural perfumery. You can find him at [www.theblacknarcissus.com](http://www.theblacknarcissus.com)**