

SCENTS of survival

Since surgery and treatment for breast cancer, Michelle Hather has been unable to wear perfume. Is it a physical or an emotional response to her illness? And does it matter? The answer, she says, is an almighty YES! GH follows her quest for a life that smells sweeter...

PHOTOGRAPHY
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On the morning of my wedding, I woke to find a tiny bottle of eau de toilette on my pillow, placed there by my mother. When I was a child she had let me entertain myself with the bottles of Joy and Chanel No 5 lined up on her dressing table. She had ushered in my teenage years with a gift of Anaïs Anaïs and, slightly baffled but proud, had hailed my status as career woman wreathed in clouds of Opium and Poison.

Now she chose to wave me on to this next stage of my journey with the heady florals of Estée Lauder's Beautiful. It became the scent of my marriage, my go-to fragrance for all the milestones: the anniversaries, the births of our children. The wedding dress went into storage after the Big Day, never to be worn again, but the fragrance lingered - as if it was an eternity ring in a bottle.

'Til death do us part, or so I thought. Eighteen years later, my marriage is - thankfully - as strong as ever, but a half-used bottle of Beautiful remains stoppered, as I can no longer bring myself to wear it.

Four years ago I was diagnosed with cancer. Everyone warned me that the loss of my hair would be the worst part. They were wrong, of course. Fearing you are going to die and leave your children motherless is the worst part. And once you get the news that, with the advances in treatment - particularly with Herceptin and Tamoxifen - you could well live, then your main preoccupation is pain, post-surgery scarring, fatigue and nausea. Hair? Who even needs hair? It grew back anyway, as soon as the treatment stopped.

But what I had lost, seemingly for ever (and



'I was alive, but deprived of the sense that gave me so much pleasure'

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] compared with my life it seemed such a tiny thing to worry about), was my love of perfume. The fragrances that had once formed an olfactory background score to my life now repelled me. At first, I thought it would pass. I had been seriously ill, after all. My hair when it came back was coarse, grey and curly. When I looked in the mirror, a stranger looked back at me. But soon the iron-grey locks were gone and my old hair was returning like a familiar friend. Surely the same would happen with my sense of smell? The bottles lined up on my dressing table – a reminder of my mother’s – waited patiently to be recalled to duty.

But, if anything, I was getting worse. As normal life resumed, I felt assailed by smells from every quarter. Travelling to work on the Tube, the aromas of busy humanity filled my nostrils. Rather than wanting more competing scents, I wanted fewer. A moisturiser so mildly scented I had never even noticed it before made me want to scratch my face off. I switched to unscented shampoos, ordered my food plain and shunned flowers.

Post-cancer I longed to wear pretty fragrance – to boost my confidence, to make me feel attractive and womanly, to send a sensory message to my husband that I had returned and was ready to live life fully. I was alive, and I was lucky. But deprived of the sense that had previously given me so much pleasure, I began to wonder if I was even Me any more.

None of the online breast cancer forums I trawled through mentioned this loss, other than in relation to the ghastly chemo

Sense of discovery, clockwise from top: Givenchy Very Irrésistible l’Eau en Rose, Miller Harris Le Petit Grain and Annick Goutal Eau d’Hadrien

nausea days. Notes were compared about drawing eyebrows back on and the miserable irony that breast cancer treatment often makes you gain weight. But no one else owned up to having an apparently permanently heightened sense of smell. Maybe it was just me – whoever Me was now.

Then I switched jobs, leaving academia to return to women’s magazines. A chance conversation with a beauty editor led to the subject of my fragrance phobia and an appointment was duly arranged with master perfumer Roja Dove. Could he help me rediscover my long-lost love?

‘Smell was the first sense we developed and it was used originally to sniff out a mate or food or danger,’ Roja told me. My body, he said, was mustering its natural defences to keep me safe.

‘When you’ve been through a physical or

emotional experience such as illness, you don’t want anything around that is alien or you feel is aggressive and may harm you,’ said Roja. Instead, I needed a fragrance that echoed the smells that made me feel safe, secure and well. Producing a dozen or so scent-doused sample sheets, he took me on a journey, like a walk through a beautiful garden. Eventually I was drawn to an extract of lilac. Soft and round, it was the exact opposite of aggressive.

Since then I’ve been getting more adventurous. I’ve experimented with Jo Malone Basil and Mandarin; the soft notes of white thyme and limes have sat happily on my skin. Likewise, the fresh, citrusy scent of Annick Goutal Eau d’Hadrien seems to suit me. Givenchy Very Irrésistible l’Eau en Rose smells like heavenly, freshly-cut roses. And Le Petit Grain by Miller Harris – orange oil top notes grounded by earthy rosemary – is a joyous new discovery. It sits by my bedside, next to the other fragrances that make me feel safe and secure.

So now I know who I am again. I am still married, though I am not the bride on her wedding day any more than I am the stropky teenager or the 1980s power dresser. I am a woman who has borne three children, thrived in an uncertain job market and survived cancer. I have changed. There is so much to do still, and my fragrance choices now are sharper, cleaner, purposeful. To be alive is romance enough for me these days... □

‘I longed to wear pretty fragrance to boost my confidence and make me feel attractive’

