

I MARRIED A PERFUMISTA
by Neal Patterson

“What do you think of this?” Kathy asks, jutting her wrist underneath my nose.

My stomach clenches. A new pop quiz has begun. A pungent blast of fragrance assaults my sinuses. Not necessarily bad, but strong, with a choking flash of alcohol fumes. I nod my head, hoping in vain that this reaction will satisfy her query.

“A nod. What does that mean?” she probes.

Oh God. I take another whiff, and memories of my grandmother’s bathroom come flooding back to me. Those overpoweringly feminine scents which would thrust my boyhood soul into a state of anti-girl revulsion.

“What does it smell like to you?” This is my wife’s way of trying to be helpful.

I want to say “perfume,” but I know that won’t suffice. I use my catch-all description of anything that smells like an old lady’s lavatory.

“It smells powdery.” I reply.

Kathy flashes me a disapproving expression. “No, that’s not what powder smells like.”

Now I’m confused. I thought the question was interpretive, like ‘how does that piece of music make you feel?’, or ‘what does that cloud look like to you?’ I take another feeble stab.

“It smells like soap,” I mutter with a quiver in my voice. The same quiver of uncertainty and shame which accompanied every answer I ever gave to any math teacher in my life.

Predictably, Kathy flashes me the same disapproving expression of every math teacher I ever offered a reply to. “No, it’s orange blossom, with a touch of sandalwood and musk.”

Oh right, that was going to be my next guess.

I always prided myself on having a pretty good sniffer. As a young man, I took a certain joy in identifying an enigmatic ingredient in a dish just by the aroma. I was usually the first one to notice when a pilot light had blown out or when something was burning in the oven. And when it came to aftershave, I felt somewhat superior to my friends and co-workers in that I actually tried different fragrances in search of the one which would best suit my body chemistry. While others doused themselves in Old Spice or funky body sprays, I focused on aftershaves with a musk note. Granted, I was still buying from the drugstore, but I was a discerning drugstore shopper.

Then I met Kathy, who has one of the best noses I’ve ever encountered. Within months of our dating, Kathy had me switch to Obsession, which offered warm, natural scents of nutmeg, clove, lavender, and sage in addition to the musk. Not only did Kathy find it wildly appealing, I enjoyed smelling like a cozy kitchen with pies baking and dried flowers on the table. I soon realized there was more to selecting a good aftershave besides focusing on one complimentary note...like not buying aftershave in a drugstore.

Speaking of obsession, Kathy has always been one to cultivate consuming passions for certain topics or hobbies. We each have hobbies and are always showing support for the other’s compulsive inclinations. We first met through hobbies, in a way. Many years ago, I was working on independent comic books with an artist friend and,

while we were in the living room creating comics that hardly anyone would read, Kathy was in the loft upstairs with the artist's wife creating beaded jewelry. Impressed with her artistic flair, I enjoyed offering opinions on which beads to use, or which color combinations worked best. Having labored in a paint store during college, I felt confident in my knowledge of color.

After we were married, she took up knitting, and I dutifully provided suggestions on the colors and textures of yarn I liked best. I still sit beside her at night and feed out the yarn from the ball while she knits and purls.

This perfume thing has me stumped however. I just don't smell all the things that are supposed to be going on in these perfumes. Kathy assures me that I could detect these notes if I trained my nose to understand what they smell like. I'm skeptical. Just as I never had the hand/eye coordination to play video games or throw a baseball properly, I don't think this ol' schnoz has the necessary number of scent receptors to discern the myriad notes in a fragrance. Usually, the scents come to me in general categories: floral, soapy, powdery, musky, sweet, etc. If I'm having a good day, I can detect rose or lavender, but that has to be a really good, pollen-free day. I can detect citrus scents, but Kathy usually points out that I've guessed the wrong fruit. Suddenly, I'm back to third-grade Phys. Ed. class and I can't shinny my lard butt up the rope beyond two feet.

I'm also perplexed by the vast number of perfumes on the market. Every flat space in our office is decorated with tiny glass vials rolling about and clattering on the floor. To me, they all exhibit a certain category of scent: floral, soapy, powdery, musky, sweet, etc. I'm beginning to think the perfume industry could use the same suggestion I would have for the porn industry. Although it's against our capitalistic nature, I believe

someone could put together a comprehensive encyclopedia of pornography, featuring people of every possible race, gender, size, and hair color, then cross reference them with every possible act, position, and fetish. The result would be a porn library for everyone, and no other porn films would have to be created ever again. Why not have a comprehensive collection of perfume, selecting the most popular scents for every known body chemistry? Then there would be a scent for everyone and no other scents need to be created. Of course, our active, independent human brains convince us that, just as there has to be some new sexual activity that's never before been invented, there has to be a unique new scent that no one has experienced before. All I can say is, if this revolutionary scent be experienced, it won't register on this pedestrian nose.

Several months back, Kathy excitedly informed me of the Sniffapalooza going on in New York. I secretly prayed that she would have a friend who would want to go along with her because, otherwise, I would end up the default travel companion. Don't get me wrong, I love New York, but I couldn't see myself spending a weekend in the Big Apple trudging through department stores burning out my olfactory sense on the latest from Calvin Klein or Dolce & Gabbana. Fortunately, she found a girlfriend who was curious and tagged along. Now the girlfriend is a perfumista-in-training. I guess the affliction can strike anyone...except me.

With her new recruit, I thought I was safe from any perfume quests. Now I'm informed that there will be a Sniffapalooza in Florence, Italy. I have to get my passport renewed for the pursuit of more floral, soapy, powdery, musky, sweet, etc. At least the pasta should be good.