

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

Rebecca Brooks Carroll

My Life As A Nose

I was thirty-eight years old when my nose became the thing I dreaded, the thing I hated, the thing I revered. It began on a hot April day. Too hot for April. The delicate bedding plants I normally set out in April died within the week. I was sitting at the kitchen table, looking at an L.L. Bean catalog. I was normal. It was a Sunday evening, and all across America, women were sitting in their houses doing normal things like cooking, watching television, reading, or looking at magazines and catalogs.

"I smell metal," I told my sixteen-year old daughter.

Laura looked at me with her perfectly waxed eyebrows raised and a mouth turned up slightly at the corner. She usually looks at me that way.

"Mom, you can't just smell metal. That's retarded."

"But, I do. I distinctly smell metal."

My news was too much for her. She slammed her door. I got up and sniffed around the kitchen. Was I smelling pots or pans, the stainless steel sink, the antique wrought iron pot rack inherited from my grandmother? I should be eating a piece of chocolate cake and thumbing carelessly through *Southern Living*. My nose led me under the sink where the drip still dripped in a bucket, into the front coat closet which smelled like the beer spilled there months ago, and down to the basement where all things usually soaked up and emitted a stale odor. I returned to the kitchen which seemed to be drawing me there with its heavy metal bouquet. Once more, I opened the door under the sink. *Bar Keeper's Friend*, I thought. That nice cleanser which made copper and stainless steel sparkle like factory new. I sniffed the can, but it wasn't the smell I was looking for. By now, my nose—if not my brain—was saturated with every fragment of metal in the house. Enough. I went into the living room to watch TV.

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In the filtered streetlamp-lit bedroom, the squared red lines on the clock said 2:58. What was that smell? Something was baking. I was up immediately. I must have forgotten to turn the oven off. But no, I didn't cook today. We ordered pizza. I checked anyway. The oven was cold, but I smelled strawberry muffins baking.

By morning, the muffin smell was gone. Instead, I smelled a caustic skunk. That was normal enough, I considered. The woods next to our house were home to possums, skunks, squirrels, and other unknown creatures. After my shower, I found myself opening the back door and actually breathing deeply, taking in the offending odor.

"Mom, shut the door, you're letting in that skunk smell."

"It smells kind of nice. Like the beach after a rousing rain."

Laura's voice was irritatingly high, "You're crazy. Skunks stink. Shut the door." She disappeared into the bathroom.

I went on about the week poking around my dying bedding plants, putting out the garbage on Wednesday, and going to work at my part-time job as a receptionist. I smelled smoke on Rosie who always swears she doesn't smoke. I also smelled the breath mints and chewing gum she used as cover. I smelled the ink cartridge in the copier and thought it smelled good enough to eat. The second he walked in the door downstairs, I smelled John Sim's far-reaching body odor that smelled like a football player after practice in August. I smelled the unclaimed food in the office refrigerator located in the other wing of the building.

Wednesday evening found me feeling a little low. I looked in the mirror expecting my nose to look different. It was still straight and a little turned up on the end. My brown eyes and hair were still a boring brown. I looked ordinary, but something was extraordinarily abnormal about knowing that the Johnson family two streets over had grilled shrimp for supper and that the Wilsons had stewed okra and tomatoes. I knew this because I smelled it on the way home from Kroger. I also knew what the Bakers, the Browns, the Robertsons, and countless others ate for supper. When a scent drifted to me, I knew the house from which

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it came.

Friday was my day off. I was at a loss for what to do. I sat on the porch and smelled the neighborhood. I smelled pool chemicals, the early morning dog poop, a natural gas leak, the garbage truck, and pungent daffodils. I smelled Mr. Gaither's death even though he died ten years ago, a faint trail of camphor and urine-soaked linens mixed with a frail man long in dying. I began to wonder if odors actually drifted to my nose or if my nose was actually seeking out these smells. Perhaps it had some invisible antenna or a radar device and it was constantly looking—no, sniffing—for something. But why? I decided to go out and try and seek out odors rather than wait on them to come to me.

The yard seemed a likely place to start. My first scent was a rabbit. I knew what rabbits smelled like because my mind traveled instantly to a summer when my ten-year-old brother had spent the day romping the barnyard and outbuildings with his dog. When he came into the house, my mom and I had both wrinkled our noses and looked at him at the same time. "Get in the bathtub this minute," she said. "You stink like an old rabbit." I wasn't sure what the difference was between an old and new rabbit, but the smell stenciled itself into my memory to be forever associated with rabbits. I followed its trail into a thicket, leaning over, then dropped to my knees so that my nose was closer to the ground. Dogs are built for sniffing, I thought. Humans walk upright because they don't have a strong sense of smell. Despite our anatomical differences, I found the rabbit burrow quickly at the bottom of the sloped yard under some tree roots. The rabbit sat on its haunches a few feet away, darting its black eyes back and forth. It was gone quickly, frightened from its own little home and leaving in his flight a memory of my brother. Next I followed the trail of the stray, gray tabby I had seen running off my porch late last night. He was at a house on Cedar Street, eating cat food while the resident cat sat and watched. I smelled the diesel of a school bus on Alger Road and its trail of children's hastily eaten breakfasts.

My research into my new found endowment continued in the mall at a Brookstone store with a 10x magnifying mirror. I timidly paid for the

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mirror, hoping the sales clerk didn't wonder why anyone would want to buy a mirror that aggrandized the ugliness of skin. Fearful of what I might see, I scurried out of the store into the bright sunlight, sitting in the car before I left the mall parking lot to study the malformations of my nose. Monstrous pores and nose hairs that looked three inches long. It was five minutes before I realized my foolery. What did I hope to see? Would my nose look any different? Beyond their basic structural similarities, all noses look different anyway. I decided to take the mirror back tomorrow. On Kingston Pike, I smelled my way through the fast food lines, stopping at Krystal for two hamburgers, at Wendy's for a Frosty, and finally at McDonald's for a large order of fries. Chili's and Ruby Tuesday would have to wait. My nose was obviously much larger than my stomach.

My fingers clicked at the computer all day Sunday. Four web sites told me I had hormonal imbalances. Between sites, my hand fondled the outside of my nose. Sometimes I would grab up a little hand mirror and study my face, noticing there was a constant smile on my lips. I wrote down addresses of French perfumeries and typed a resume with a detailed paragraph about my extraordinary sense of smell. I thought of attaching medical records, but I had none. They would want me, I knew. I wondered if they would pay for a plane ticket. On Monday I hurried to the post office and mailed my future. I stopped at Sears. I would need a new suitcase.

"Have you heard of a Nose?" I asked Laura as soon as she came in the door.

"Are you cooking?"

"They work at perfumeries. They make lots of money."

"I'm taking a nap before I do my homework."

"I'm thinking of going to Paris. I could make some money."

Thud. My cheap ceramic plates rattled on the wall as her door

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reverberated her answer through the house.

"Paris?" Laura said a minute later as she came back into the kitchen.

"Yeah. Paris."

"Cool, Mom." She was gone again.

Laura paraded several outfits before she went out on Saturday evening. I purposely picked the one I disliked the most. She'll pick it, I know.

"That shirt smells funny. It smells like locker room death," I told her.

Her eyes rolled.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"Just out. Movies maybe."

"You know, I can smell drugs now. I smelled Vicodin on a lady in the Wal-mart yesterday. She looked really sleepy, you know. You have to be in by eleven."

"I'm wearing the red skirt."

"It's cool out. Wear a jacket." Her eyes rolled. Does she practice that?

"Marijuana, too," I said. Those last words bounced off her door.

Haarmann & Reimer. Paris, France. That sounded official. They must want me. I sniffed the envelope. Faint traces of perfumed had traveled across the Atlantic. "We are excited to . . . Odor Evaluation Test . . . follow directions carefully . . . we will contact you with the results." UPS delivered a large box the next day. It had cartons of 200 vials of oils-half

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were labeled--, result sheets and ten pages of instructions. I waited two days before beginning the test. No salt, no spices, no perfumed soaps and shampoos. I began at three in the afternoon, and by two a.m., I had completed the test. I even made an extra notation that the oil of ylang-ylang not only came from Madagascar but was extracted early morning. I struggled with that distinction because I didn't know how I could have known the difference between morning and evening. But somehow I knew, so I left my note. Five weeks later, the letter with good news came; they wanted me to come to Paris for further evaluation. I visioned myself sitting at a perfume organ with dozens of small bottles of perfumed oil with their wonderful essence and walking the streets of Paris like I lived there instead of a tourist on a two-week visit. I would learn French. *La vie est un reve*. The bad news: I had to pay for the plane ticket. More bad news: I had no extra cash in the bank, and my credit cards were fatalities of overuse. Paris would wait.

In two weeks, I covered six extra shifts for other employees, had a yard sale, got my income tax refund, and had enough to buy the plane ticket. At home, I held the ticket to my nose, fresh from the ticket counter at Knoxville's McGhee Tyson Airport. The ticket agent wore perfume—not cologne—Happy. The Clinique girl had given me a sample last week.

"You can't just go off to Paris," Laura said.

"You can go with me if I get the job. I have to apprentice six years."

"Will you get paid?"

"Yeah, some, enough to live. We'll be poor, but we'll be in Paris."

"I heard once that people have an acute sense of smell before an epileptic seizure. How about I just stay with Dad, but visit you some."

"You know I have brown pigmented cells in my epithelium."

"Whatever." The familiar slam and bang as she disappeared. Five minutes later, she stuck her head out the door.

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"I wanna go."

I smiled, pleased, but at the same time, my mind was calculating the cost of another plane ticket. Her dad would have to pay for it.

It was a clear October day, and the hospital cafeteria suggested itself all the way up Tennessee Avenue to my back yard. I had been raking leaves, enjoying the earthy smell. I went into the house to get some water when I heard the doorbell.

The man had gray hair at the temples and wore a tweed jacket, no tie. A light blue, two-door Ford Escort sat in my driveway.

"Hello," I said, opening the door cautiously, keeping one foot behind it.

"Sherry Armes?"

"That's me." He had eaten lunch at Subway.

He slowly took out a small wallet and handed it to me. John Talbot, FBI Field Agent, 008654822683.

"Gift?" I asked as I held it to my nose.

"Excuse me, what did you say?"

"It smells new." I handed it back as he shifted uneasily on his feet.

"What do you want?" I asked. I thought FBI agents were calm and came in pairs with dark suits and long, black sedans.

"Can we talk? Inside, I mean?"

I looked around. He smelled of Zest soap and Old Spice aftershave and a faint trace of White Shoulders. I led him into the living room, directing him to the red wing back chair. I hoped he didn't see my framed GED

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certificate hanging over the desk in the corner.

"It's about your olfactory system. We need you."

"I know what that is, but what can I do?"

"We need you as a bomb sniffer at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport."

I thought of my rabbit trail. "I thought dogs did that," I said.

"People expect dogs to do that. They don't expect another person to be sniffing for bombs. And dogs are fooled easily."

"I don't know anything about bombs."

"We'll train you."

Traces of Happy drifted through the house. "But I'm going to Paris. I have a ticket."

"We can't force you, but think of the good you can do. Think of September 11. You'll be paid well." Did he notice my ten-year-old car, and was he looking at my worn out sofa?

"How did you find me?"

He smiled. "Your email. To Leffingwell & Associates."

"You bugged my computer?" I wondered if that was the correct terminology.

"They contact us when anyone contacts them about an intense sense of smell."

He left me with a packet of instructions and a few days to think. I had a good settlement from the divorce, but most of it was invested long term. It would be nice to have extra money. Maybe I could go back to school

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someday. My training would take one week. He had left the plane ticket smelling of stale smoke. Paris would wait.

It was mid December and a hard, dry cold in Washington. It was cheaper to house me in a hotel near the airport, and I enjoyed, for a time, the maid service and the sense of a vacation. On my days off, I did the Lincoln Memorial, most of the Smithsonian, the White House, the Washington Monument, and shopped for Christmas. Outside, my nose took a slight break as smells were diminished in the cold air with little moisture to carry them. Inside, in the cold comfort of the airport, I had my little station at the security check-in counter. I wore a navy blazer and skirt uniform and greeted each person as they went through. They saw me as just another airport worker. I also had to keep a sniff out for carry-ons. Dogs did the sniffing for what went in the belly of the plane. I had spent weeks at the airport smelling everything from hartebeest horns to forgotten condoms stuffed in a suitcase. My nose was working overtime, and there were days when I wished one tiny little bomb would come through to break the monotony of the well-paid day. The most interesting day was when Bill Clinton and a large following came through my station on his way to dedicate a new wing of the airport. The corridor was cleared of most airport employees, but they let me stay—I could be helpful. He stopped to shake a few hands, and as I felt an ex-President's hand close on mine, my nose worked and I picked up a trace of cigar and alcohol and hair gel.

I had felt the creeping of dread for a few weeks now. I couldn't bear to look in the mirror at the largest extension on my face. I poured hot sauce on all my food. I took decongestants and antihistamines. I went to a store and took deep sniffs of cleaning products. I blew my nose endlessly. When I checked my makeup in the mirror, my mouth seemed permanently turned

down. My feet hurt, and I missed Laura. The good part was that I would get two weeks off for Christmas and Laura would get more gifts than usual.

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My supervisor was yelling and knocking at my hotel door. It was two hours past my shift start, but I had called in sick. I took the box of tissues with me to answer the door. He looked at my robe and my disheveled hair. His mouth was slack.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sick. My nose runs and runs. I blow it and nothing is there, but water pours out of my head.”

“Take a shower, see if that helps.”

“I want some medicine. I took a shower. I want to go home.”

“You can’t have medicine. You can’t smell bombs.”

“I can’t smell anyway with water coming out.”

“Go on home. Come back in January with a new nose.”

I took a hotel bath cloth with me on the plane home. I had used all the tissues. I walked out of the airport with an oozing towel and a red nose that smelled nothing. A thousand pieces of an expired Paris plane ticket scattered on the sidewalk.

– Rebecca Brooks Carroll has a MA in English/Creative Writing from the University of Tennessee, and teaches English at Pellissippi State Technical Community College and at Tennessee Tech University, both in Tennessee. She has had stories published in the Louisville Review, the Hawai’i Review, the Birmingham Arts Journal, and in two, local anthologies. Rebecca has also published a historical novel, Milk Glass Moon. She and her husband Terry have five children and two grandchildren.