

The Devil's Aftershave

By Pete Malicki

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Cast

John – an adult male with a heightened sense of smell

Set

An empty room. A chair is centre stage.

Scene

John is sitting. Throughout the play he does not breathe deeply – mostly through his mouth, to the degree practical.

John: There's one thing I can tell you about superheroes. No matter which one you're talking about – Spiderman, the Hulk, Catwoman – there's no doubt I have this right. Even if you created an entirely new one, this would still be true: superheroes don't have super smell.

That might sound like a funny point to make, but have a think about it. What separates a superhero from an ordinary person? Powers, right? Most are incredibly strong, some can fly, others have laser beam eyes. But can you imagine one with super smell? Superman's flying through LA on his way to pull a drowning girl from a sewer.

John stands, arms straight in the air.

John: His eyes are blistering from the millions of smog particles he's inhaling per second and the stench of a million people's shit smacks him in the face like a fist. "Screw this," he says, and the girl drowns with a lungful of slimy sewage.

John lowers his arm.

John: I was born with an incredibly heightened sense of smell, but alas I cannot fly nor lift a truck above my head. Wherever I go I am assailed by odours: the constant pong of life.

When I was young I wanted to swap my sense of smell for better sight. There's nothing wrong with my eyes by ordinary standards, but compared to what my nose can do I'm effectively blind. Instead of X-ray vision I had X-ray smell.

I didn't have a large number of friends. It wasn't as if I was socially inadequate or reclusive, I just couldn't stand the smells of other kids. There was Donny Parkins, a popular, friendly kid, who smelled of dough and flour in the morning and acrid sweat from recess onwards. I could bear him until ten thirty, then the games of tip turned him into a stale change room two hours after a big match. The first girl who ever liked me, Judy Bloom, was an evening showerer and had nightmares. She never told me this but fear caused hormones to leak on her clothes and skin. She was stale by morning and fetid by lunch time. She tried to kiss me once but her halitosis mixed with peanut butter and white bread made me gag.

I turned my nose up at most people and had few friends, only the most tolerant and odour-neutral kids. Was this my destiny? To be alone, bombarded by putrescence? My life started on a very bad note and I hoped to improve it.

I hid my distaste a little better in high school but many odours made me hurl, and the lingering, off-carrotty smell of vomit and bile in my mouth kept me in a state of perpetual weakness. Teachers said I was distracted. “Open to page twenty-two,” Miss Baker said, wafts of her mother’s perfume coming out of her armpits each time she turned or wrote on the board. The musty book-smell would make me gag and turn my head to the side, only to catch a mouthful of rotten timber from beneath the carpet. To eat, I would hold my breath and choke down sour, overripe fruit or sandwiches made from festering bread and bitter, leathery vegemite.

I was compared to Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the murderer from the novel *Perfume*. Totally unfair. I’m not a serial-killing toad. He dedicated his life to distilling pheromones from dead redheads, all I wanted was to silence the screaming stench. I experimented with drugs, booze and tobacco, hoping to numb my overactive nose. My first cigarette was like putting my head in a dirty old fireplace filled with burning plastic. I still remember the searing in my eyes and the agonising pressure in my head. Marijuana was no better, though I could stomach it in a cookie. It screwed up my brain and blurred my vision but it couldn’t block the smell of decomposing leaves in the neighbour’s drain. Cocaine was worse and I was too scared to ever try heroin.

If I got hammered I’d be just as obnoxious as the next underage drinker, but when I came to I could remember what happened by the chronology of smells from the night before. Mouldy bits of food stuck to the insides of foily food wrappers, rancid old cigarettes mixed with vinegary wines and fermenting, frothing beers. The smooth velvet of a pool table and the dull taste of porcelain from balls cracking against each other, the hollow tinge of chalk from the cue tip, the bite of silver coins. And blood. The metallic, steely smell of blood, sharp like a razor, rank as it congealed. The mere memory of blood made me gag.

Nothing would lessen my acute sense. Have you ever met a pregnant woman? Her oestrogen brings out the sweaty cheese of life, but it’s nothing compared to what I go through. What about a dog? You hear they have such powerful noses they can detect fear. That may be so, but they also shove their heads into each other’s arseholes for a good old sniff. I can smell a dog’s arsehole from two hundred metres, and let me assure you there is nothing left to the imagination. Pal and recycled vomit is five times worse on the way out.

Did you know that of all your senses, smell has the closest link to memory? How many times have you caught a whiff of something that reminds you of the distant past? For me, everywhere I go I have my childhood forced – quite literally – down my throat. Want to walk in my shoes for a minute? The train stifles me, with sickly-sweet deodorants assaulting my sinuses and the sting I get in my eyes every time a smoker boards and reminds me of that first cigarette. The most attractive women all seem to wear the perfume my mum did when I was little; she was always one generation too young with her fashions. I can see her making sandwiches when I smell these perfumes and it is *not* a turn on. I step through a nauseating wall of brake dust and revisit the time I camped in a disused train tunnel when I was thirteen. And the city.

Here’s something I want you to do. Imagine a bin filled with your ordinary kitchen waste. It’s been left there for two months, totally full. Put your head in

it, close the lid, and inhale until your chest swells so large it hurts. That's how the city smells to me. Every step a SWAT team of putrid aromas leaps out at me with guns blazing. I hurry through this noisome cloud and enter the building I work in, where I soak up the stone stairs and greasy metal railings, passing the fish market tuna smell of the immigration specialists on level three. On level seven, my PC's charred disc drive takes me to my first Atari and a festering wall of coffee breath pins me to my seat, closing in from every direction. But as gruesome as these odours are, the one thing I truly can't stand is my boss. Five years my junior, his aftershave brings me to my earliest memory, of a man I despise like the Devil himself. Every time I see the boss I'm filled with disgust and hatred and self-loathing, which is a pity because he's a nice guy.

On the last day I ever went outside, I visited my sister. The eggy, coleslaw-and-mayonnaise smell of her kid's sperm was on every towel in the house. Some of it was in Jen's underpants drawer, which is fairly disturbing. She asked me how I was going and I gave the usual answer. "Terrible. I don't sleep, I hate my job, and I hate the way everything in this city smells." "So move to the country. Go somewhere natural; have a *tree* change." "It stinks there, too. Nothing but cow shit at every turn. There's nothing natural about millions of cows crammed together." "Oh come on John, is it really that bad?" Ugh, I could have hit her. A lifetime of this torture and my own sister doesn't even get what I'm suffering. "I would cut off my own nose if it would help," I said. "Nothing is pleasant for me. Nothing! Roses are so pungent they make my head spin, chocolate is like bike grease drizzled over burnt sugar, even the fluoride in tap water makes me feel like I'm swallowing chemicals. The bodywash you use reeks like decomposing flowers and your earwax fills my mouth like old garlic. I can even smell the last time you pissed. How am I supposed to enjoy life like this?"

Things were mighty awkward after that little outburst so I made an excuse and went. This seemed to happen a lot with Jen. I was always offending her. I don't drive a car because of petrol fumes, squalid oils and tyre rubber, so off I walked down the street. Mere minutes later, an old man came out of his house and that smell wrapped around my throat like a noose. Cognac, cigars, and my boss's aftershave. His visual appearance meant nothing to me but I knew exactly who he was. People's odours are as unique as fingerprints; I could recognise his like anyone else would recognise his face.

Without a beat, I marched over and grabbed his wrinkly arm, pulling him inside and into the kitchen as I turned my head away from the stench of that aftershave. My earliest memory enveloped me. The Omo smell of my freshly-laundered pillow, the bark from the tree out the window and sap as possums' claws dug into its branches. A leafy breeze as my door opened and the wind was sucked in, then something unspeakably unclean as someone entered my room. Suddenly, cigars, playing cards and the faint tinge of urine as his hand clamped over my mouth. Cognac on his breath. A weak, cottony odour as my shorts tore. The smell of my fear. My sweat glands opening, salty at that moment but stale as I cried into the morning. And blood. The metallic, steely smell of blood, sharp like a razor, rank as it congealed on my body.

This old man now lived just down the road from my *sister*, from my sister's *kid*. I saw red. Blinded by the memory of his strong, calloused fingers pressing into my mouth and eye, I sniffed out the cutlery, groping for a knife. My hand

wrapped around a big one and I slashed it towards him. Stab stab stab, five times, eight times, nine times.

I don't remember much after the petrol fumes and squalid oils and tyre rubber as they took me away. The overwhelming effluence of the holding cell. Days of stench – weeks of it. The court didn't believe what I said the old man had done to me. I tried to rob him, the prosecution claimed, and lost it when he refused to cooperate. My sister knew none of what went on back then and gave me a weak character reference, stating that she didn't honestly know me that well, and maybe I *was* capable of snapping.

I could appeal the sentence, but I actually cope in here. The thugs in this place stink as much as any other human being does but they don't wear that aftershave. I've got twenty-five years to get used to the blood and piss and sweat and sperm, but what's twenty-five years to a superhero? You think they can beat Captain Nausea? Fuck that.

Lights down.