

Welcome to My Bubble  
by May Cotton © 2021, 2022

Dan was leaning over me at the table last Wednesday, going over the statement he'd gotten at the dentist's office that morning, when I first noticed the odor.

"Those girls really put their hands all over you," I told him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're all perfumy," I said. He moved away, but the odor persisted, even got worse. I reached for the papers we'd been reviewing and was instantly overwhelmed by the fragrance emanating from them. I quickly dropped them and backed away. He moved them to another spot on the table and went to wash his hands. I placed a magazine over them and they sat there for a couple of days.

On Thursday I got in my car to go to a doctor appointment. As I opened my car door, I was overwhelmed by the same odor which had been on the dental paperwork. I grumbled to myself that Dan was not going to drive my car again if he was going to bring it home smelling like that, and cracked the windows as I drove downtown; it was too cold to really roll them down. I continued to notice the odor while I sat in the waiting room and later in the exam room. By the time I got home and hung up my coat, I realized the fragrance had permeated my hair. I brushed my hair in an attempt to get it out, but not until I washed it was I finally rid of the smell. My coat continues to hang in the laundry room, where it offends me every time I go near.

On Friday, as I got in my car to pick up a prescription, I called the dentist's office and spoke to the receptionist.

"Are you burning scented candles in the office?" I asked.

"No," she said, sounding puzzled.

"Dan came home with this horrible fragrance all over him," I explained.

"Oh," she said brightly. "That's our new hand sanitizer. Did he use the hand sanitizer while he was here?"

"I doubt it," I replied. "He doesn't use hand sanitizers. He would have gone in the bathroom and washed his hands." Then I proceeded to tell her how the odor had permeated my hair, my coat and my car, that two days later I was still dealing with it, and I was completely dismayed that a medical office would use such a product.

"I'm allergic to fragrances," I told her.

"I am too," she admitted. "They give me the sniffles. But everyone who comes into our clinic has commented on how lovely our office smells, so I've just been sniffing discretely."

"I should be so lucky," I replied. "I start coughing, then my blood pressure rises dramatically, and I get a bad headache. I hope you will find a different hand sanitizer before Dan goes back for his March 1<sup>st</sup> appointment, and certainly before I have my next cleaning in May."

"I'll talk to Doctor about it," she assured me.

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Welcome to my bubble and the reality of having the human equivalent of a bloodhound nose. Since 2010, when I experienced chlorine poisoning from the outrageous amount of chlorine used by Spokane YMCAs in their pools, where I was working as an aquatics instructor, I

have had to live in a bubble. The day I was dragged out of the pool and taken to the ER, I nearly killed the EKG tech who came take my vitals. “Get away from me!” I screamed. “Your fragrance is killing me!” He left and then came back with a mask. I fought him as he tried to put it on my face because the stink of perfume was on his hands. In my opinion, medical personnel should never wear fragrances.

I cannot go to theaters or gyms or anywhere near the soap aisle at any grocery store because of the fragrances. I cannot ride in airplanes or buses. I can't go to airports or restaurants or classrooms or anyplace else where people gather in public because my allergy has only gotten worse. In church I always have to sit off by myself, away from other worshipers, and when I go to meetings, I have to stand outside the room and listen.

It used to be that I couldn't bear to be in outdoor crowds because of the cigarette smoke, but now it's because people don't realize how much their fragrances clash with other fragrances, creating an environment where folks like me can't breathe.

When I researched the problem, I learned that artificial fragrances are hormone disruptors. This makes sense when considering that in nature, fragrances are designed to attract flying creatures for pollinating plants, or to the opposite sex for mating. However, in the human world, we fail to understand that icky odors are intended to keep us away from things which might be poisonous or otherwise bad for us, so we cover them up with fragrances. We see that certain fragrances attract us to members of the opposite sex, not realizing the body odor being covered up is supposed to tell us we are incompatible with that particular individual. It really doesn't surprise me there are so many failed marriages these days. How many women ask themselves, “how could I have married this man who stinks so badly I can't stand for him to touch me?”

Marketing has taught us to believe that clean has a scent, when in reality clean has no odor at all. This flagrant manipulation of misinformation has people buying products to scent their homes, which not only prevents them from smelling the garbage that needs to be taken out and the litter box that needs cleaning, but also subjects them and their family members to indoor air pollution. Folks wonder why there is so much more asthma these days, why their children are so sick all the time. I just look at those statistics and roll my eyes.

The dryer sheets sold as Bounce™ is one of the worst offenders. It is so strong that even the unscented variety picks up the fragrance from the scented boxes sitting on the same shelf. Returning contaminated items to the store does nothing to help educate store owners, even with careful explanation as to why shelving these items next to each other is a disservice to the public. The makers of Bounce could care less about how badly they are polluting people's homes; they laughed at me when I requested they at least package their evil product in cellophane to avoid air contamination. As I walk through my neighborhood, I can smell which homes use Bounce in their laundry as it permeates the outside air from the dryer vents. And in public, I can identify every individual whose laundry was dried with Bounce. I had to stop shopping in thrift stores because it can't be washed out of garments with polyester in the fabric.

Now that we are facing down the Coronavirus with our pathetic little masks, no one looks at me strangely in the grocery anymore, where I have been wearing masks for years. Unfortunately, except for N95s, which actually filter the air, fabric masks do not filter out fragrance. They reduce it a small amount, but not enough for me. So in recent years I've resorted to ordering fragrance free items online.

Now that we are all masking and shopping online, I am appalled by the number of packages I open which reek of cheap perfume worn by the person who packaged my order. My carefully selected products intended for removing odors arrive with perfumy smells all over their packaging. I even received a Christmas card from an acquaintance who is a heavy fragrance user; I reeled away from the envelope and dropped the card on the table. I ran to wash my hands and blow my nose, trying to get the fragrance out of it. Later, wearing medical gloves and a mask, I set the card outdoor to allow the fragrance to dissipate. If I purchase the products this woman sells, she leaves them on my doorstep, and I put the payment under the mat.

I was horrified when a board game I received this past Friday smelled suspicious when I took it out of the package. After letting it sit away from the packaging for a couple of days, I carefully removed the cellophane from the box. I was hit again by the flowery fragrance, and as I lifted the lid on the box, I was smacked by perfume coming from inside the box. I'll take the smell of mildew on slow-boat-from-China boxes any day over the nasty fragrances worn by the people who assembled this game in Germany. The headaches just aren't worth the products I've tried to buy. At least in the summer I can put things outdoors while the odors dissipate in the sunlight. In winter I am flummoxed by the problem.

I don't mind living in a bubble, since I tend to be an introvert, but I miss interacting with others a couple times a week. Thankfully the Internet allows me to be with my writing groups and others on Zoom without getting sick, as I did one Monday a few years back: a fellow writer read about the homemade lotion she had crafted over the weekend; following her truly eloquent essay, she passed around a jar of it for everyone to try. I was sick before the lotion even made it to my side of the room, and I had to leave soon after. I stayed long enough to read my own essay, but regretted it. The accolades didn't stay with me nearly as long as the headache.

Welcome to my bubble.