

“Welcome to My Bubble”
by May Cotton © 2021, 2025

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 1st appointment, and certainly before I have my next cleaning in May.”

“I’ll talk to Doctor about it,” she assured me.

* * *

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 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™ are 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.

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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 outdoors 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.

“Being Alone”

by May Cotton © 2021, 2025

It was Tuesday evening, and my family would be home the next afternoon. After three full days of being alone, my fourth day was interrupted by a phone call from my bestie wanting to know what it was like to be alone, I learned from her voicemail.

I am sitting outside in the 94 degree heat, enjoying my new table and chairs with their comfortable red cushions. I am listening to the sounds of silence. The air conditioner is only drowned out by the roar of a motorcycle. The chimes behind me tinkle musically in the wind. It becomes more than a breeze, stirring up strong currents of air whoosing through the yard.

A squirrel rushes up onto the patio, pauses when it sees me, backs off. Runs across the grass to the lilac, dashes up a limb. Stops to look at me again. Jumps to the next bush then onto the next. Drops to the ground and runs along the wall to the base of the bush closest to me. Up the trunk it rushes, takes up a sentry pose, watches me watching it until I speak aloud. Then it leaps into the tree and dashes up into the branches where there is nowhere else to flee but onto the roof. I do not hear it again.

When the air turns off for a moment the roar continues in the distance as the neighbor's air is also running, keeping our 100-year-old neighbor comfortable as she lives out her final days, getting progressively weaker and then stronger, losing ground and gaining, as so many do.

The sparrows flit around, dropping onto the grass to scavenge the cherries brought the night before from the neighbor's tree, the parent birds preparing to teach the young ones to feed themselves. I am struck by the realization that baby birds must learn to fly before they can learn

to hunt or scavenge and feed themselves.

What's not to like about being alone? The silence is wonderful, even though it's not silent at all. Rather it is a cacophony of birdsong punctuated by distant machines carried on the breeze. I consider it silence because I hear no voices, no ringing of the phone since I turned off the ringers. I hope my regular contacts respect my need for quiet. (Later both asked if I was mad at them!)

Being alone lets me be exactly who I am without the worry of who or how I might offend. No need to interact, to pay attention, to consider what I'm about to say before I say it. To care if someone is listening when I begin talking to myself.

But for now I am not talking. I am writing instead, ruminating through my thoughts until I am distracted by the sights and sounds of the world around me. And then I write about them.

When I come outside to listen, I hear a tent meeting going on at the mega-church across the river. A rhythm of footfalls comes up the hill and recedes into the distance as the athlete runs out of earshot. An insect chirps its solo. Gabbers march in step down the hill.

FedEx chugs up the hill, it's radio crooning to the tires; the breeze whistles through, carrying sounds from a distant neighborhood.

In the quiet, I am content.

“Monday Morning Melancholy”

A Freewrite about Fences

by May Cotton © 2021, 2025

The opposite of a fence is open range, acres and acres of unimpeded land where wildlife live free and roam, where the sky is so vast and blue the lakes reflect it's glory, where the land remains untainted by human touch. In Wyoming, where there are miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles, the 82 miles of road between Medicine Bow and the outskirts of Casper used to boast 31 cattleguards and the occasional “open range” sign to remind foreigners that cattle roam free in these vast acres of hilly grassland. When we first started making the trip from Laramie to Sheridan, we used to count the cattleguards, noting over the years that the number grew smaller and smaller, sometimes as the metal-covered culverts were filled in and painted with white lines to fool the cattle into being afraid to cross.

There is little open range left in modern America. The greed of the few has turned the land into a wasteland of organized agriculture. Where do the wild horses roam? Where do the buffalo go when they are too cumbersome to leap the wires separating production from profit. Is

there a distinction between the left and right sides of these fields? Is something being fenced in or fenced out? Indeed, what is the purpose of a fence?

* * *

If a fence represents greed, the opposite of a fence sharing.

“Yes, I own this land, but you may walk through it. Please try not to trample the wild flowers.”

“Why yes, it’s perfectly all right for you to pitch your tent in my field. Just use the outhouse, please, and don’t knock over the corn.”

* * *

A fence is a judgment on society. It says that we are a selfish culture, that it’s everyone for themselves. It’s tribal in the most basic of ways.

“Don’t cross this line.”

“It’s my way or the highway.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“I’m just sure if you cross my boundary, you will trample my flowers / steal my yard decorations / let your dog poop in my grass / take things off my porch / break into my car / vandalize my house.”

* * *

Does it get any worse than this? We don’t trust each other, to the point that when the neighbor’s wife dies, the neighbor tells his only friend not to tell anyone. How paranoid do you have to be to not want your neighbors to know that someone living right there next door is gone and isn’t coming back? How paranoid are the rest of us going to becoming, knowing you don’t trust us?

* * *

The opposite of a fence is trust. I trust you not to steal or damage anything that belongs to me. I trust to you pitch in and help out with the chores because I was kind enough to let you share my abode. And if I share everything I have with you, I trust you not to ask me for more.

It seems that our society has fallen off the rails and is careening toward a canyon where we will plunge to our demise. We have become so very tribal in our pettiness that we have lost sight of the very thing that makes us human — not our opposable thumbs and our self-awareness, but our compassion for others. Why is it that for every person who is willing to give you the shirt off their back, there are a dozen more who will fight over the shirt and rip both it and its owner to shreds?

“The Highlight of Bessie’s Life”

by May Cotton © 2021, 2025

This piece is from a Writer’s Workshop Exercise on August 8, 2021. We had about ten minutes to write after being shown a newspaper clipping with a photo of Bessie. This is what I wrote in my journal:

Bessie, an African cape buffalo, lived at the Prospect Park Zoo in Brooklyn for 32 years. Write about the highlight of Bessie’s life.



What could possibly be the highlight of the life of any animal confined to a cage in a zoo? Bessie was probably contained in a small yard with a stable to keep her hay dry and a place to lie down. She must have had a mud hole to wallow in, so I’d have to say the highlight of Bessie’s life would be the spring thaw when her mud hole sprang back to life and gave her the first wallow of the year. Bessie counted time by the seasons, with the spring thaw marking her New

Year's Day and each new spring adding another year to her life.

Bessie didn't think she was supposed to live this long, but then again, she didn't think the place she lived was actually where she belonged. Sometimes in her dreams she was running long distances over low rolling hills and fields of blooming grass. There was something tender and delicious about these dreams, especially when she woke to the scent of fresh grain in her trough and fresh water in her bucket.

They did take good care of her, these strange two-legged creatures who seemed to enjoy hosing Bessie down after she had her first good wallow. The water would not be as cold next time, nor the mud so crystallly prickly, the frost giving her hide a good massage. Next time it would be warmer and then warmer still, until the two-leggeds had to fill Bessie's mud hole with water from the hose to keep her happy.

Not until next year at thaw would the annual New Year's wallow be as delicious as it was today, the highlight of her year until her final spring wallow was her last and surely the highlight of her life.