

The Man Who Couldn't Smell Straight

Before my problem I had an exceptional nose. One whiff of any wine and I could identify the grape, the vineyard and vintage every time. I wasn't a sommelier, but could have been. I was a CPA, which isn't even close.

My amped up sense of smell had always been a blessing and a curse. I once lived in an apartment building where the woman next door wore this God-awful perfume. Donkey Piss No.5. The stench seeped into my place through the walls. Oozed past electrical sockets and under the baseboards. Gave me a massive headache until I plugged up the cracks and got some relief.

About six months ago things began to change. My sense of smell was still acute, but I started misidentifying odors. I'm not talking about confusing the subtle character of a Cabernet with a Merlot. No, this was far worse than a delicate loss of fragrance distinction. I found myself mistaking the dark-heavy aroma of freshly brewed coffee for the sour wet smell of my dog Kramer after a romp in the creek. The glorious bouquets of new mown grass and squeezed oranges were replaced with the odors of burning tires and men's locker room. I met a woman for dinner and complemented her on her perfume. She had just farted. Wine, God have mercy, smelled like gasoline to me. My olfactory wires were crossed. It was driving me bat shit.

I called my physician, Dr. Carlos Ringlab, and made an appointment. After poking his little flashlight up my schnoz and finding nothing amiss there, the good doctor said,

“I think we should run a few tests.”

I could smell that one coming.

The tests consisted mainly of a nurse waving objects under my sniffer and asking me to identify them while blindfolded. (I was blindfolded, not the nurse.)

“Can you tell me what this is, Mr. Shankman?” she asked, holding a lemon beneath my proboscis.

“Onion,” I stated confidently. She probably frowned.

Back in his office Dr. Ringlab delivered the diagnosis, the prognosis and the bill.

“The problem is in your brain Leo,” he told me. “We can fix it with surgery, but it won’t be easy.”

“Hey, let’s go Doc. I can’t live like this. When can we...”

“Not so fast my friend. I must caution you, there may be side effects.”

“Side effects?” I muttered. “You mean like ‘*side effects may include vomiting, diarrhea, loss of sanity...?*’”

“Not exactly,” the doctor warned. “Cutting into the part of the brain that controls your senses introduces the danger that you may lose one or more of those senses in the process. Do you understand what I’m saying Leo?”

He gave me his most concerned physician look. I was busy taking inventory of what my five senses were exactly. Let's see...sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell. The doctor noted my silence and suggested a reasonable course of action.

“Go home Leo,” he said. “Think this over carefully. There's no rush. We will proceed as you see fit.”

Following his advice I went home, sat down and poured myself a nice Petite Syrah. The label read, “...rich with blackberry and pepper spice, hints of chocolate.” I swirled the ruby red liquid, inserted my delicately calibrated sniffing instrument into the glass and inhaled the unmistakable odor of dead opossum.

Despondently I pondered which of my senses I could live without. Sight? That would be a tough one. Bumping into things. White canes. Dogs. Sounded very bad. Hearing? Say goodbye to Bruce Springsteen and Robert Plant? Yo Yo Ma and Herbie Hancock? I'd hate that. How about touch? The sensual feeling of my fingers moving down a woman's back. The warmth of sunshine on my face. Tough to live in a world minus those indulgent pleasures. As for taste, what good would it do me to re-connect with the fragrance of a great wine if my taste buds were out of commission?

As I wrestled with these impossible choices I caught the reek of dirty socks coming from my kitchen. I removed a pizza from the oven and vowed to take my chances under the knife. The alternative was living in an *Alice-In-Wonderland* world where nothing smelled quite as it seemed.

Two weeks later on the operating table the anesthesiologist instructed me to count backwards starting at ten. I made the observation that something smelled like shoe polish. He rolled his eyes and I began counting: "Ten...niiiiiiiiii..."

I awoke in total darkness. The worst of the feared side effects had been visited upon me. Out of the blackness that had surely become my fate I heard a voice say, "Open your eyes Mr. Shankman." Ah, that was better. I could see. I could hear. Two out of five wasn't bad for starters. I brought my hands tentatively to my face and groped around, feeling the familiar contours with immense relief.

Later that day I passed the final tests with flying colors. The burger tasted like a burger, mustard like mustard. And glory be, I identified every aroma correctly as well. I could have kissed old Ringlab. I was cured.

Unfortunately in the weeks following the operation a phrase the doctor had uttered came back to haunt me. "Not so fast my friend." Something was wrong.

I'm not sure I can adequately convey the new problem, as it was difficult to comprehend even as it was happening to me. Apparently some of the wiring in my cerebellum had become badly entangled or grew back together wrong. The unsettling result essentially was this: what I saw I tasted, what I heard I felt, what I felt I saw, what I smelled I heard, and what I tasted I felt. If that sounds confusing to you, imagine how screwed up I was.

Gradually I found myself experiencing more and more of these crazy mixed up reactions. I would look at a slice of apple pie and taste it. Not think intellectually about

how it might taste. But actually experience the exact flavor sensation on my tongue. The sound of rain on the roof produced a feeling of moisture on my skin, an experience so real I felt the need of a towel to dry my arms and face. There were times when I touched a lover's skin in the darkness before dawn that I could see her body as a perfect image before my eyes. Not in my imagination, mind you. But as a fully formed vision, clear as any observed in the light of day.

As time went by this condition grew worse. The appropriate sensations of sight or touch, taste, hearing or smell completely disappeared, leaving the totally disoriented perception in its place. If a cow went moo in the pasture I couldn't hear it. In place of the sound I would smell the distinct odor of a Big Mac.

I called Ringlab, hoping the work performed on me was still under warranty. Ten days later the surgical team scrubbed up and I floated off again to la la land.

“Ten, niiiiini....”

I don't blame the doctors. They clearly pointed out the pitfalls and I accepted the risks. I would take the same chances all over again.

I don't expect nor do I seek pity. In fact, with some obvious exceptions, my life is not as bad as you might think.

I do object to the “deaf and dumb” label. I have not suddenly become stupid, though I am now quite unable to hear.

In my world of perpetual night I miss the sights of beautiful women and pink sunsets. But human eyes are forced to look upon much in a sighted world that is painful to observe. I am spared those particular sorrows.

My skin is a blank canvass, impervious to pleasure. But also to pain. I occasionally long for the absent taste of a medium rare filet mignon. But then, I've lost 15 pounds.

I am aware that outside my silent sightless bubble I am sometimes referred to as a vegetable. This really pisses me off. I am neither cauliflower nor broccoli. I despised the retched flavors of those awful plants when I could taste them.

You may note that I have not yet mentioned the status of my olfactory capabilities. I am happy to report that this sense is fully functioning. In fact, it operates at an even higher level of sensitivity than before. My superior nose is responsible for a whole new career as Senior Consultant to the manufacturer of an expensive, subtly aromatic line of perfumes.

Oh, I know what you must be thinking: "That poor man. How awful for him." But you're wrong. My losses left me with a rare gift I did not anticipate. In my world of silence and darkness I have learned a wonderful lesson. How to stop and smell the roses.

