SCENTS AND SENSITIVITY

She has never known the fragrance of a beautiful flower – or been able to tell by sniffing whether food is safe to eat. Lucy Mangan on being born with no sense of smell

I am not a fully sentient being. I am referring to the fact that I am congenitally anosmic; or, as I more helpfully put it when people thrust perfumed articles under my nose and invite an opinion on the aroma, I was born without a sense of smell.

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That experience, however, does not compare to the time I was persuaded by school friends that as I couldn't smell Emma Webster's perfume, I should drink it. This was, I recall, on the grounds that taste and smell are so closely linked that it would give me at least some idea of the delicious scent I was missing. Alas, all it taught me was that perfume is not a beverage, and I was left feeling sick for days.

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I had enough sense to buy a smoke alarm, but it wasn't until my sister called round and nearly collapsed from the smell of a hob burner I had accidentally switched on that I realized I needed a detector that would alert me aurally to gas leaks before I blew up the street. A few bouts of food poisoning alerted me to the fact that I can eat food which would cause those with functioning nasal passages to call in the public health authorities. I now check best-before dates assiduously and treat three-day-old milk with the respect it deserves.

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I subscribe to the 'what you've never had, you never miss' school of thought, but for those who lose their sense of smell, the effect on their quality of life can be enormous. Professor Tim Jacob at Cardiff University, who researches olfaction, explains 'Anosmics will have found other ways of adapting, using texture and consistency to get information about food. But people who once relied on their sense of smell do not know how to cope without it.'

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And those are just the obvious things. As Jacob also notes: 'You lose lots of subliminal information and links with the emotional centres of the brain. Smells are inextricably linked with memories and form the backdrop to your sensory experience. The smell of your first girlfriend's perfume or boyfriend's aftershave, anything associated with strong emotion, will always trigger a rush of memory.'

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Alarmed at the thought of producing sickly babies, I enquire about treatment. For those who have lost their sense of smell through infection or damage, the news is relatively good. 'They usually regain some ability because the olfactory nerve is capable of regeneration,' says David Roberts, ear, nose and throat consultant at Guy's & St Thomas's Hospital in London.

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I will have to soldier on, and draw what comfort I can from a recent exchange with an ex-boyfriend who, as we reminisced about our relationship said wistfully, 'You were the best girlfriend in the world. You let me eat all the garlic I wanted and it didn't bother you.' I'm putting it in my next personal ad.

A Naturally, the problems of being olfactorily-challenged don't compare to those which attend blindness or deafness. Nevertheless, certain things do have to be taken into account, and certain precautions taken, which you only fully appreciate when you start living alone.

B 'The tongue can only distinguish the four basic tastes: bitter, sweet, salty, sour. Smell detects flavour and nuance, so they lose all significant sense of taste. About 17% become clinically depressed. Some become oversensitive about having body odour and are frightened of going out.'

C Steroid-based drug treatments can help further. Nasal polyps causing blockages to olfactory passageways can be treated medically and surgically. But, as one might expect, less can be done to rectify causes one is born with.

D 'It's a very emotive sense,' he explains. 'The nerves stimulated by smell send messages to one of the oldest, most primitive parts of our brain, which is why it's so integral to our lives and why people feel they cannot do without it.'

E It took until I was seven to convince my mother of this. She reluctantly acknowledged the truth of my claim after making me sniff the fumes from her bottle of nail varnish remover until I looked up hopefully and said 'My eyes are burning – is that what you mean?'

F I am beginning to feel quite intrigued by this unknown world of smells taking you back in time, but this quickly deepens into concern about what else I am missing. 'And, of course, you are attracted to people who smell different from you, because it suggests they have a different immunotype,' says Jacob. 'It's the evolutionary system trying to get you to pass on two sets of immunity advantages to your offspring.'

G I have also learnt to stock my shelves with visitors as well as myself in mind. So I have fruit teas in the house even though they appear to be nothing more than an expensive way of colouring a mugful of hot water, and herbs, even though they are a matter of supreme indifference to me. When I cook for other people and a recipe says 'season to taste', I have to hope for the best.