

■
IT SMELLS
JUST
AS SWEET
(A ROSE
OF A
DIFFERENT
NAME)

Bella
Milroy





Hanging my head over the bath so mum could wash my hair before the mobile hairdresser arrives, I can smell the crotch of my pyjamas, knowing I had not left this suit meant for sleep in over three days now. It's a familiar smell; almost comforting, a kind of yeasty, earthy, barnyard smell – not unpleasant, but distinct. It reminds me of my Granny Rust. Smelling it so frequently of myself, I take pleasure in being reminded of her in a way that feels liked being hugged. Using this perfume as a way of time travelling, I reach out and hold her tight, inhaling this scent that's shared and heavy, holding her hand.

Like me, she found washing hard too. Mum would wash her hair over the bath, just as she did for me today. Mother to mother, mother to daughter. I wonder if I'll I ever be able to wash her hair.

I remember those steely strands of thick, fatty hair, held in a bob with long tortoiseshell clips above each ear, unhinging them off her scalp as a mum tucked a towel around her collar. In its very nature her hair was wiry and large. Each strand had weight to it, a characteristic both mum and I are fortunate enough to have inherited almost

identically. It would frame her oval face and the chub of her cheeks (another legacy I carry that brings big smiles and generous double chins). Pulling down from a centre-parting, it formed a dense crop of *beautiful* hair, an aesthetic that rejected any aseptic standard.

With my neck precariously levered as I hunch over the white enamel, mum drenches my scalp in a way that feels as miraculous and clichéd as getting baptised. To become clean is nothing short of a miracle; hot water on demand and foaming agents that lift all traces of dirt from our inherently dirty bodies – it is not the cleanliness that astounds me, it is the act of engaging with such accumulations to lift, shed and peel them from our forms. Hot flannels wipe away the surface-grease of my nose in a way that steams my soul just as much. To feel the abrasive brushing of my tight, itchy gums in mint-flavoured glop is to speak with an entirely new mouth. But until it's all washed away, I take it in, breathing heavily into that scent that we condemn in social pariahdom. I want to linger in it a little longer, feel the clam of my armpits and the damp paste between my legs. It doesn't feel all





that bad, but it stains me in a way that signals what I can't do; why I can't remove it myself – regularly, reliably, repeatedly. So for now I think of her, and what coming into the proximity of her fragrance felt like. It was never repulsive or repellent. It smelt like what it meant to be close with her, to love and to hold her. It smelt like my Granny.


In another bathroom setting, she would sing to me in the bath, serenading me with early 20th century ballads like “Scarborough Fare”, “Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag”, and “It’s a Long Way To Tipperary”. A particular favourite was “Hold Your Hand Out You Naughty Boy”, originally sung by Florrie Ford in 1913, which turned out to be a wartime smash-hit. The song entails what is essentially a pre-world-war fuckboy, captured in the cheekiest of lyrics, charmed even more so by her rendition of it with the alteration of the original chorus that sang, “*You told her you’d never kissed a gi-ii-rl before*”, into “*It wasn’t the girl I saw you with in Bri-igh-ton*”:

*“Hold your hand out naughty boy
Hold your hand out naughty boy
Last night in the pale moonlight*

*I s-aa-w you, I s-aa-w you
With a nice girl in the Park
You were strolling full of joy
**It wasn’t the girl I saw you with in Bri-igh-ton,
Hold your hand out naughty boy.”***

For a remarkably quiet person, these were especially intimate moments in which her quivering voice would climb octave after octave, thinly singing out these tunes like a songbird in the distance. Her presence here was not so much of active carer but more silent guardian. As was the case for nearly all my time spent with her up until her death when I was 8, she was very, very quiet. She experienced lifelong mental health conditions, primarily Schizophrenia, one of the many mental conditions that run in the family (her own mother died from what we have concluded to have been alcohol poisoning when Granny was a small child). Her Schizophrenia and subsequent psychotic episodes affected her profoundly in many ways, and made her life very challenging at times. Upon a short lived and ill-fated family emigration to Canada in the 1950s, she also underwent ECT (Electro Convulsive Therapy).







As a family, to this day we are still unsure of the details of her institutionalisation during this period, and I question the nature of her treatment amidst a landscape of clinical misogyny and rampant incarceration of women under the label of “Hysteria”. Regardless, all of this meant that by the time I knew her in the last few years of her life, she was quiet. A family phrase is that she was in a permanent state of “comfy-stare”; not absent or vacant, just a little veiled – a bit tired, but ultimately comfortable, restful, happy. She would sit in our front room with a blanket on her in the height of summer, G n’ T in hand and Emerdale on the telly whilst I played at her feet. She sat quietly as we podded peas in the garden, and would smile gladly at heavily buttered toast at a chatty kitchen breakfast table. That was her way of being present with us. She was content.

Singing to me in the bath, those moments are not of daily sterilisation, but of intimate caring and consideration for each other’s bodies in ways that are profoundly supportive yet absent of obvious clinical action. In moments like this we sit together amongst the dirt, under fingernails and crusted

up eyelashes. To engage with our own dirtiness in this way is to connect with the disobedience of our bodies and their ephemerality. It does so in a way that directly holds hands with the nature of what it means to be sick. I wonder if the way we share these behaviours in this accumulateness of smells and grime, we can remember each other, even re-enact each other in ways that reflect our stillness, our sickness; our presence becoming more than just a body in the room, but a life, full, in its own right.


Dust, like our bodies, accumulates without effort. In this we can see how limitless our bodies are, how uncontained they can be, particularly when left unkempt. When I wake covered in drool I often think of those post-mortal farts and shits that fall out of us unaided by autonomic muscle contractions. It spills out, onto bed sheets, bathrooms and armrests; the dirt-stains of my neck found at the base of my pillow, stripping off the case to reveal the giraffe-print cartography from gel-covered cheeks of disturbed sleep. I think of her flat in Cambridge. We rarely visited her home, partly due to the fact that she lived so far away





and so she always came to us, but also because of how domestic maintenance eluded her throughout her life. Mum would describe the (many) homes she grew up in full of damp towels, cat-piss-heavy carpets and mice in her nicker-draw. Despite always feeling loved by her, warmly and forever, my Granny's inability to engage with the residue of life in the domestic setting was a constant signalling of her own body's limitations. It was evident in one of my only memories of visiting her flat, watching Free Willy on a tiny box screen sat on the floor of her hard, thin carpet. The stairs to her flat were dark and dusty, the kind of dust/dirt you'd find on the stairs on the underground, instinctively avoiding it. But it is her bathroom that I remember the most; the flies on the toilet seat, and, upon sitting on it, that gaze around the small room, simply observing in a way only a child can, that this isn't quite like the bathroom at home. What I love about this memory however is that I never remember feeling uncomfortable there, or that she was uncomfortable either. She wasn't living in squalor, and she wasn't unhappy in the state of her surroundings. It was simply a reflection of her capacity to "deal with" the inevitable gradual gathering of own her existence within the realms of domesticity.

There is a particular phenomenon that occurs when these kinds of scenes are encountered amongst loved ones. To face the vulnerability of your body's limitations is a challenge in itself – that these smells, this dirt – it is a part of me and part of how my body works/doesn't work, that it is a way of archiving sickness, evidencing it in sensory stimulus that is both grotesque and mesmerising. Exposing loved ones to these intimacies in terms of care, or simply to be in the company of, requires a particular kind of understanding. Our societal instinct to tidy, clean and abolish dirt in all its forms interrupts such encounters in ways of shame and disgust. When we understand the nature of our bodies is to amass such matter, that it is an essential part of the sick experience, we can find ways of engaging with one another that allow room for such sensuality. In these contexts there is no fecklessness or incompetency; only cleaning between the rolls of a baby's chubby wrist, the peeling away of week-old pyjamas to reveal muted bright skin, and even the fondling of a warm dog-poo through a thin, black bag. There is no denying the unpleasantness of it, yet within this remains a core component of the exchange;





a careful negotiation between our own revulsion and the close contact we must make with our body's innate productivity/bi-productivity/output. When we participate in those moments of vulnerability through acts of care in this way, we are cataloguing our own precarious capacities. We find ourselves seen, remembering each other through moments of wearying fatigue and accompanying pain, restfulness, stillness, stench and sadness, heartfelt touches and shared smiles (with crumbs of pizza crust in the corners).

As mum wraps a towel around my drenched head, I pull myself up from beside the bath, feeling the throb of an upright pose. I am now sensually immersed in the duality of my body; the frothy perfume of shampoo rings in my ears, whilst the thick scent of my pyjama bottoms wafts upwards. Part new car, part tired blanket, I climb upon the red folding PVC-padded chair for Julie the hairdresser to begin to transform me, as she now does from month to month. Doris wanders around my feet, sniffing at those chestnut strands which stick to her mussel and pepper her fur in fine confetti. When it's finished, I pull my hand

from the nape of my neck up against the grain of my hair to feel the serrated cut that she has clipped underneath my short bob. Like a chrome finish, it re-plates my scalp to make it feel new in the sharpest and shiniest way. Looking in the mirror my face is re-framed, and all of a sudden I am dressed in a way that fits the world outside again. Remaining in those same scent-drenched pyjamas, I return to bed, having performed that self-maintenance task in a way that feels sufficient enough and deeply restorative. I sink, knowing that despite this sense of newness, I stay in uniform, my behaviour regimented by the silent dictation of my body's strict limits. In this battle-hardened outfit of worn, soft-striped jersey which sags around my knees, I pull my hand up the back of my scalp again before drifting off; It'll do for now.

Upon waking, I shuffle downstairs before Jono gets home from work. I see the pile of hair left on the floor, a stack of untethered protein filaments nesting upon slices of brown parquet. My DNA, my genes, all the secretes of my disease, all wiry and thick and big like hers, I breath deeply,





“Having my haircut at home is the most wonderful thing...being clean is the most wonderful thing...”

Pulling my legs up to my chest on the sofa as I prop myself up upon a pile of wadded cushions, I again catch that perfume, heavy and dense, a concentrated stock cube. I wonder if this is what Jo Malone means when she talks about creating fragrances for her posh £50+ candles? One of her candles *“Peony and Moss”* is described as,

“The contrast of the dainty and the dirty. The gossamer lightness of delicate peonies grounded in earthy green. Verdant and Delicate.”

There is no denying the power of fragrance in its capacity to transport us through time, straight back to memories both strikingly significant and unknowingly meaningful. Perhaps my own version of “dainty and dirty”, smelling my vulva, and the warm, unwashed inside of my legs makes me think of my Granny Rust. I wonder if this could be any more romantic, any more beautiful, any more grotesque?

When Jono comes home from work, he flops next to me. We lay there a while, not really speaking much. He tells me how nice I look, and I reply in a smile. In this pleasant stillness, I think of her again, re-enacting those moments of quiet, unspoken joy. I played her part perfectly, the soft friend that’s a pleasure to be with, this generational mimicry reflecting ways of being and ways of loving. Being sick today was a way of remembering and loving her. I am reminded that my presence is joyous, supportive and meaningful; my pain doesn’t make me absent, it just dresses me a certain way. I am fulfilling and fulfilled. Outlined with dirt and grime, I sit amongst my body, and those whom I love.

