

May B. Smith English Composition Award

Deb McIntyre

CPO 984 or

1005 Whippoorwill Dr. Apt. B

Berea, KY 40403

The Scent of a Memory

Put a box of fresh strawberries under my nose and I am a child again – crawling among the green rows under the late spring sun with my quart basket. The coarse straw dents my knees, my fingers and chin are stained pink with juice, and I'm dreaming about berries and ice cream for supper.

Our family grew varieties of berries and sold them. Neighbors and friends were always willing to pay for the sweet goodness, picked through the hot, back-breaking labor of others. Strawberries were the easiest, if you could stand the crawling because they were ripe before the summer sun became unbearably warm and the mosquitoes and horse flies came looking for victims.

Grampa had been a hard worker in his day, but by the time I could pick, he was past 80. Arthritis and swollen feet from heart congestion kept him from doing more than watching nearby under his straw hat with a cane held in his age-spotted hands. Grampa would pay me a nickel a basket for each one I managed to fill. Sometimes I earned as much as a quarter – enough to buy a whole sack full of penny candy or slush at the malt shop. I thought myself rich.

In psychology class we studied the brain and learned that there is a physical reason why scents transport us so quickly to the past – a close link with the hippocampus and the olfactory organs.

Most memory-laced scents I encounter are associated with happy times – especially my childhood. Daffodils evoke visions of Easter dresses, chocolate bunnies, and pastel-colored eggs. We children used them for hiding games until they cracked and fell apart and were no good for human consumption. Peonies smell like “Decoration Day” and I recall our traditional march around the country church cemetery, solemnly throwing petals on the veterans’ graves.

Wood smoke is a pleasant smell, too, even though it is not sweet. It reminds me of roasting marshmallows on crisp fall nights after a hay ride and singing under the stars at church camp around the bonfire. Buttered popcorn reminds me of the delightful anticipation of a crowded movie theatre – waiting with other jubilant fans on the opening nights of the three *Lord of the Rings* movies.

In general, I hate cigarette smoke, but when the temperature is just right as the odor hits my nostrils, I find myself exploring the intriguing offerings of a Saturday morning estate sale. The auctioneer’s call blends with the voices of country folk as they discuss farm machinery while smoking Marlboros and eating hot dogs bought at the food stand.

Some scents are associated with less pleasant periods in my life. The stuffy, antiseptic corridors of medical care facilities is poignant – recalling two summers in college when I worked in a large home for the developmentally disabled. There I was bit, slapped, made to mop urine off the floor, and lead grown men to the toilet like I would a two-year-old. Also, there is the fall

of 1998, in which I spent the greater part of a month in the intensive care unit of an Indianapolis hospital, sitting and dozing by the side of my autistic son, tubes coming out of a half-dozen places on his body. His appendix had burst and by the time they decided to gut him open like a dead rabbit to discover the problem, infection had set in and it nearly killed him. No, that smell is not pleasant.

If I could choose any scent at all with which to live day in and day out, I would pick a damp, deciduous forest in the spring. The bouquets of earth: wildflowers, decayed leaves, sweet breezes with a hint of pine, are entwined tightly in my mind with freedom, joy, and adventure. I love nothing more than to grab a walking stick and head for the woods with a favorite book tucked in one pocket and a camera around my neck to both savor and capture the beauty I will find.