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SCENT ADDICT

WHEN I SMELL TENNIS BALLS it reminds me of my dad—more specifically, it reminds me of this one particular time at a sports store when my dad told me that tennis was actually invented by the best friend of my great-great-great grandfather (there might be another “great” or two in there, I’m not sure) who fought in the Crimean War, and discovered that he could launch grenades back at the enemy by swatting them with a racket-type object he had invented.

When my best friend Jimmy smells tennis balls he hears a sound like a fat guy doing a belly flop in a swimming pool. For some reason this sound tends to remind him of his wife, and he goes a bit crazy.

Then I have to tell him that Kristina’s dead. He needs to move on. You don’t want to waste another year of your life.

“She was a lifeguard,” he always says.

I don’t care, Jimmy. Move on.

“Dude, if you make me late I’m gonna castrate you with a pair of rusty garden shears,” he said to me.

“You don’t have the balls,” I said, zipping up my hoodie.

“And you wouldn’t.” He was fiddling with the doorknob.

I shoved on a pair of argyle-patterned tennis shoes and followed Jimmy outside into the fresh town air of Hoodoo. “Where is this thing again?” I asked as we stepped onto the sidewalk.

“At the end of Twelfth Street. Right near the river.”

“And we’re gonna walk there?”

“It’s a beautiful night,” he said.

“Where’s your car?”

Jimmy sighed. “Mom-in-law has it. She’s shopping at West Ed this weekend.”

“She’s not your mother-in-law anymore, man,” I said, but didn’t get a response.

A few blocks later we were cruising the main strip of our booming metropolis. I pointed at Hank’s Beef ‘n’ Beer. “Is that a new sign?”

Jimmy squinted. “Looks like it. Hank’s selling bottled water straight from Hoodoo’s own Blackmud River.”

“Sick,” I said. “Did you know that’s not its original name?”

“Hank’s?”

“No, the river. Originally was called Green Bear River.”

Jimmy lifted an eyebrow. “Really?”

We passed by a billboard declaring that the Almighty Walmart would be opening a new location within our borders. Someone should warn the welcoming committee.

Jimmy flipped his hair off his face. “Where’d you hear that?”

“My dad.”

“I think I’ve heard this story before,” Jimmy muttered, kicking a rock into the gutter.

I shrugged. “He said the river starts way up North, and when the first explorers got there they found green polar bears drinking out of it, so they called it Green Bear River. They didn’t know they were polar bears, of course; they just thought they were some New World Green Bear.”

“Green polar bears?”

“Yeah. Sometimes when there’s too much algae kicking around whatever place they’re drinking out of it gets stuck in the bear’s fur and turns them green. Google it.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “And you believe this?”

I gave him a shot in the arm. “Hellz to the yah.”

After that, my dad told me that the same thing could happen to my man bits if I didn’t shower enough. It was his way of promoting hygiene.

We finally made it to Twelfth Street and hung a left. “Why are we going to this stupid show, man?” I asked. “It’s May-long. Andrew and his goons are doing some huge camping thing down by the river. We should go.”

“Dude, it’s The Shingles.” He flipped his hair off his face again. “Kristina loved them.”

“Yeah, but you don’t.”

“Not the point. I need to hear them.”

Jimmy was an addict. The Shingles were his fix. Their country-twanging, banjo-picking, yawn-inducing music was like heroin flowing

through his veins. And they only came through town like once a year, so this was a big deal.

I put a hand on his chest to stop him. “But where does Kristina live now?”

He slapped my hand away and kept going. I didn’t want to be his counsellor, but somehow the role ended up in my lap. I felt like the war veteran leading a rookie into no man’s land with a cuff upside the head and a morbid joke about keeping himself together because I didn’t wanna pick up the pieces.

This middle-aged guy with a bad haircut was rocking an accordion on the corner outside a drugstore. Jimmy gave a brutal squint and slipped past him as fast as could possibly be deemed polite, blinked awkwardly a couple times and mumbled, “Nasty.”

“Not a fan of the accordion, eh?” I asked.

He shuddered. “It’s dirty, man.”

You see, Jimmy’s a synesthete—he’s got synesthesia—which basically means that whatever angel electrician was putting his brain together in heaven got a few wires crossed, so now he can smell sounds and hear smells. Apparently accordion music’s got a real sick odour. Makes sense to me.

I gave a half-laugh. “What’s it smell like?”

“Chip-dip farts.”

“My delicious dip makes my farts smell as bad as that guy’s music sounds?” Jimmy nodded. “Dude, I’m so sorry.”

That’s why we were wasting the Saturday night of May-long going to some sketchy club on the outskirts of Hoodoo called “Gimme Grub,” instead of gallivanting about the hoodoos down by the river with Andrew, his goons and a couple of kegs: Jimmy needed to smell the twang of The Shingles or he’d go into withdrawal. It definitely wasn’t for the music—just the scent it drug up.

They say smell is the closest sense linked to memory and apparently The Shingles smelled like Kristina.

We passed a bus stop outside of a little Baptist church boasting propaganda for the Christian University that practically ran the town. It and PetroCor. Just wait until Walmart was added to the mix—it was gonna be the Holy Freakin’ Trinity of Hoodoo, Alberta. Jesus, oil and cheap underwear.

My dad used to tell me that when he was sixteen he broke into the girls’ dorm rooms at the university, and found that they had been so sexually repressed, and were so excited to be in the presence of a real man without

a Bible-crushed libido, that they literally had a bidding war over who got to sleep with him, so not only did he get to do the no-pants dance with three of the hottest university chicks in town, he also scored seventy-three dollars and a Frank Zappa record.

I was thinking about my rotund and squinty-eyed father telling me that story when Jimmy dropped a vat of nearly inaudible curses. I looked up to see a line of people sticking out of Gimme Grub like a fifth limb.

“Holy crap,” I said. “People actually like The Shingles.”

“They’ve got a big Myspace following.” He kicked up his pace a notch. When he gets desperate, sometimes Jimmy will hit up The Shingles’ Myspace page and crank a song or two, but for an addict like him, Myspace versus a live show is like comparing icing sugar to cocaine; it usually just frustrates him, and then I have to deal with his crappy mood for a couple days after.

I probably could’ve counted fifty people ahead of us, oh-so very slowly half-stepping their way to the entrance. “I don’t think we’re gonna get in,” I said.

Jimmy’s gaze was fixed on the entrance.

“C’mon, man, why are you doing this?” I asked, just to get him talking.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, then turned back to face the front of the line.

“Jimmy, what the hell are we doing here?”

“Seeing The Shingles.”

“Doesn’t look like it, man.”

“Shut up!” he exploded and shoved me back into a group of girls who looked barely legal, fiddling with their IDs. Their outfits made me want to clarify that this was a Shingles’ show and not a Coyote Ugly audition.

I apologized and stepped back in beside my friend. His jaw was so tense I was worried about the safety of his teeth. My dad once told me about a kid in his junior-high class who was so stressed out during a final exam that three of his molars shattered from squeezing them together too hard.

“Where does she live now?” I asked.

I heard him exhale with a snort. “Whatever.”

As we got closer to the entrance Jimmy started bouncing on his toes, trying to see over the heads in front of us.

“Relax, buddy,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. He knocked my arm away. “Dude, you’re practically shaking. You need to calm down.”

Over the collars of plaid shirts and under the brims of various hats I could see a guy in a slick suit whispering to one of the bouncers. Despite

protests the two monstrous fellas at the Gimme Grub entrance began turning everyone away. “Show’s full,” one of them shouted. “No one else goes in.”

“Everyone get outta here,” the other one chipped in.

Jimmy dropped another bucketful of curses. “Come on,” he said, and took off around the building. I caught up to him inspecting a window coated in black paint facing the back alley. He scooted up beside it and tapped it a couple times with his knuckles.

“No one’s gonna answer the window, man. There isn’t even a door back here.” He bent over and picked up a rock the size of a softball. “Oh, hell no,” I said and stepped in front of him. “No way, man. Put down the rock.”

Jimmy looked at me as though he was figuring out a way to use my skull to get through the window instead. He didn’t let go of the rock.

“You got a lemon, maybe?” I asked.

“What?”

“A lemon,” I repeated. “My dad told me that you can use lemon juice to cut through certain types of glass.”

“Your dad is dead!” Jimmy screamed and then pitched the rock down the alley so hard it knocked over a garbage can like thirty feet away.

Jimmy is the addict. I’m the counsellor. Move on, Jimmy, move on.

I stared at him for a good minute or so, then muttered, “I know.”

“Your dad was a whack-job,” he puffed. “Sick. He was all kinds of messed up.”

“Screw you.”

You have to teach addicts not to hang on to the past: the past is what screwed them up. They need to push away from those smells, those sounds, those morbid mementos. Acknowledge death and press on. The war veteran can laugh in the face of bullets and bombarding grenades, but sometimes a rookie just needs to cover his head and run for cover.

Then Jimmy yelled, “I’m just trying to remember my wife.” He slumped onto the gravel. “Sometimes I try to picture her. It’s hard. I need to find a picture, listen to a song, or something—anything that helps me remember. That’s the scariest thing in the world, forgetting what your own wife looked like.”

He picked up a pebble, turned it over, then tossed it at the building. It clinked off the window and landed at my feet.

“Maybe we can talk our way in,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe we can sweet talk those big goomers to let us in. Bribe them with doughnuts or steroids or something.”

Only one of the bouncers was left, smoking a cigarette, arms crossed and generally looking way tougher than either Jimmy or I could ever hope to be. When I smell cigarette smoke it takes me right back to my first year of college when I got conned by a chain-smoker, who convinced me to give him twenty bucks so he could buy flowers for his wife who’d just kicked him out of the house. The guy was brilliant. Three weeks later he pulled the same con on my roommate, and we both felt pretty retarded when we realized our good deed in the name of love was probably just funding the spread of lung cancer.

I crept up in front of the beastly guard and gave him a wave. He was sitting on a stool and I still couldn’t look down at him.

“Doors are closed,” he grunted. “Show’s full.”

“Oh, well now that’s a problem,” I said. “Uh, ’cause my buddy Jimmy, here—say hi, Jimmy—Jimmy is supposed to propose to his girlfriend tonight, and she’s inside, and so, obviously, he needs to be inside as well so that he can ask her to marry him during this certain song that they’re gonna play tonight.”

“The Good Life of Moxbee Bernstein,” my friend interjected.

The bouncer raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“That’s the name of the song,” Jimmy clarified.

“Darn tootly,” I confirmed. “Very sweet love song. And he’s gotta be in there when it plays so that he can ask the love of his life to be his wife.”

“Where’s the ring?” questioned the giant.

“Well,” I hesitated. “He, uh, he doesn’t have it.”

The bouncer stood up, making the full weight of his club-ordained authority known. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“It’s an invisible ring,” I said.

“Get lost.”

“Okee dokee,” I muttered and turned away from him. “C’mon, Jimmy. I tried.”

But Jimmy wasn’t finished. He strode up to the bouncer, who had at least three miles in height on him. “You have to let me in, man.”

The bouncer leaned back against the door and laughed.

Jimmy latched onto the door handle and yanked, finding, of course, that it wouldn’t move an inch since it had a mass equivalent to a small European country leaning against it.

“You lookin’ for trouble, pal?” the mass asked.

Now I've only seen Jimmy get violent when he's slaughtering plasma rifle-toting aliens at home in his basement, so you can probably imagine how surprised I was when he launched his fist into the bouncer's jaw—almost as surprised as the bouncer himself. Which is why I had time to grab Jimmy's shirt and yank him away before the giant could fee-fi-fo-fum and turn him into a dead Englishman.

I jerked on his sleeve and took off down Twelfth Street toward the highway. "Geez, dude, c'mon!" I yelled over my shoulder. He backed up a bit away from the bouncer, and then when the big man took a step towards him Jimmy decided to follow my lead, a string of death threats following in his wake.

By the time we stopped running we were halfway across the overpass and facing one of the Badlands' many hills overlooking the town. We passed by a sign on the side of the highway that said, "Welcome to the town of Hoodoo! Who do? You do!" and which my dad always claimed he had come up with the slogan for.

That one I believed.

Eventually we settled halfway up the hill amongst some of the hoodoos the genius pioneers decided to name our town after, which were strewn down the side of the highway for a few kilometres.

Smell is the closest sense linked to memory, and when I smelled Jimmy's sweat it reminded me of his wedding day.

"Dude, you were freaking out," I said.

"I really need to hear them, man," he said softly. "When I hear them, I can—it just smells like her. Frick, I dunno, man." He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "You remember her, right?"

"Of course." I shifted my weight. "But where does she live now?"

He lifted his arm and pointed out across the highway, at a line of old pines on the West end of the town.

"That's it?" I asked. "Behind the trees?"

"Yeah," he said. "Three plots over and six down from your dad. You could probably see the white crosses behind them in the day."

Addicts need to remember the pain. The past is the muddy, shell-shocked trench leading to peace: the chaotic days, the sick minds, the mothers, the fathers, the desire to be something outside of your DNA.

The screwed-up stories.

We sat there for maybe an hour—couldn't say for sure, but I stood up after a long enough time and began to head back down the hill.

"Where you going?" Jimmy asked.

“I’m gonna go see if I can find Andrew and his kegs.”

He stood up. “I thought you didn’t like beer.”

“I don’t.”

He flipped his hair off his face. “You always say it tastes like fermented barley.”

“It does,” I said. “But I can usually scam a few Smirnoffs off Trish. Besides, my dad used to tell me that consuming at least one vodka-based drink a day would add a decade to your life and was better for your eyes than carrots. Then he would usually tell me that he had tried to pitch a carrot-flavoured vodka drink to a company when he was living in Moscow, but they rejected it.”

“Your dad was a freak, man.”

“I know,” I said, and we moved on down the hill.