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Nepenthe

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Nepenthe

Abstract

It wasn't that he smelled different to each person. Rather, there were simply no known odors with which to compare Jake Longaway, leaving each person who came in contact with him to grasp for some familiarity that never came close to reality. I brainstormed on legal pads and designed elaborate spreadsheets to try and unravel each nuance. Eventually I landed on this: to me he smelled like the air rushing through my high school carpool's slivered windows on a brisk autumn morning.

Keywords

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A JOURNAL

September 7, 2012

Nepenthe

A Short Story by Joe Sacksteder

It wasn't that he smelled different to each person. Rather, there were simply no known odors with which to compare Jake Longaway, leaving each person who came in contact with him to grasp for some familiarity that never came close to reality. I brainstormed on legal pads and designed elaborate spreadsheets to try and unravel each nuance. Eventually I landed on this: to me he smelled like the air rushing through my high school carpool's slivered windows on a brisk autumn morning.

But then, in the grocery store checkout or the mall foodcourt, he was there – or had just walked away. Either way, the *actual smell* laughed at the comparative destitution of my description.

I conducted a series of impromptu interviews with my fellow locals, asking them to describe the boy's smell. Some were uncomfortable discussing the matter, and several had the nerve to claim that they did not know the boy, or – even worse – that they had not noticed anything unique about his odor. A few of these naysayers even treated me like I was some kind of creep for asking the question, but they were small in number next to those who knew exactly what I was talking about and were immediately able to produce answers like: “All my Halloween candy mixed together,” and “Hot apple cider at a football game,” or “The hologram sticker inside a pack of baseball cards.” Although none of the smells seemed to have anything to do with one another, I did notice that they all invoked nostalgia. Further examination would often prove that seemingly unrelated descriptions were also tied to childhood. For example, I have written here that

Dawn Van Persie compared Jake's smell to "A tent you've left too long in its bag and are now sleeping in... except good." When I asked her when was the last time she'd been camping, she replied, "Oh, not for thirty years."

The Longaways moved to our town during a particularly cool August that gave way to a balmy September. They chose a house in the foothills outside of town, a house that had been on the market for half a decade due to the fact that it bordered a cattle ranch.

Just as Jake's smell was remarkable, so was he plain in every other regard. His hair was dishwater brown, ditto his eyes. Freckles lightly peppered his face. He was of average height for his age, average weight, average intelligence.

We were never sure what exactly Mr. and Mrs. Longaway did for a living. Something with computers, they claimed, though we suspected they were independently wealthy. Dealing with their son's condition was probably a full-time job in itself.

This whole ordeal might have been averted if they had been stricter. Many parents, seeing the effect their son had on the general public, might have locked him in the turret, so to speak, or at least homeschooled him. But Mr. and Mrs. Longaway wanted their son to grow up normal, and they had a sense of rightness with the world that was all the more infuriating in that they had given birth to proof of the contrary. It's true that they tried to suppress his odor. They bathed him in every cologne and odor neutralizer they could find. They draped him in heavy wool. They even tried tomato sauce.

And they were not without rules regarding how their son dealt with his uniqueness. They made it clear to Jake's teachers that he was not to smell himself in public, and they asked to be notified if he was caught enjoying his fame a little too much. For it was not a self-deception on our town's part that we noticed Jake had developed a sort of proud strut, as if his odor was a plumage he was wont to unfurl. They could not entirely police these tendencies, of course; when they entered his bedroom to wake him up in the morning, they inevitably found him fully under the covers, curled into fetal position, like he was trying to hoard all of his smell for himself.

Nor did they allow Jake to participate in sports, this after a soccer game in which the other boys quickly stopped chasing the ball around the field and started chasing Jake. It was a new variation on the popular sport, and soon the referees, flaggers, and parents joined in. Any exertion on Jake's part, we learned, intensified the scent.

On Valentine's Day at Jake's elementary school, he, like everyone, brought in a

decorated shoebox with a slot cut in the lid. Unlike the other boys, his box was so full by the end of the giving session that the lid would no longer stay on the box without hands holding it down. Sweet-smelling cards had been popular the previous year, and local stores had stocked up on them only to find that nobody wanted them this time around. Most of the girls insisted on making their own cards that year, laboring for hours in hopes to come across as attentive but not needy, mature but not bland.

This incident was only one in a series of indications that our town was attempting to purge itself of all odors aside from that of Jake Longaway. The perfumer we brought in later confirmed a baffling consumer trend that had been noticed as far away as New York City. It was not unusual, he said, for sales of perfume and cologne to rise and fall based on the popularity of whatever celebrity attached his or her name to the label. But for an entire town to suddenly stop buying these products entirely... Air fresheners, potpourri, and even scented toiletries grew stale on the shelves of grocery stores. The gardening culture of our town – which had several times been featured in national publications – cut back on flowering plants in favor of tall grasses, ivies, and succulents. We didn't want to be distracted from the memory of our last whiff of Jake Longaway. Other smells were embarrassed when they came in close proximity to Jake. Their artificiality and other shortcomings betrayed their gaudiness in his presence. If you couldn't smell Jake, it was better to smell nothing.

Animals were unaffected by Jake's smell. Cats were particularly disinterested. Though the odor from the Longaway's house mitigated the smell of the ranch next door, the cows themselves acted neither grateful nor perturbed. Jake did not attract bees or repel mosquitos.

Jake's first year here was a good one for all of us. The ghost town of our river district bustled with hat-tipping and flag-waving. Previously floundering students started outshining their reputations. Businesses boomed – except the perfume counter at Begley's, of course. Our high school, which had never amounted to much athletically, had a stellar year, with boys taking first, second, and third at wrestling states, and the girls track team breaking several records. Jake did not have his own float at the Fourth of July parade – but he should have.

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After about a year, though, there was a subtle but noticeable regression. Something nagged the collective mind, and I think it was this: our town's relationship with Jake was not going to change. Sure it would be interesting to watch him grow up, to try and detect subtle changes in his scent. But what if he grew up to be a dull, unimaginative young man? Even worse, what if his scent was so tied to youth that it vanished during his adolescence? The worst scenario of all, however, went unarticulated in the minds of most: that he would grow into a perfection that matched his odor, that his odor might even mature exquisitely like an aged bourbon. And then he would leave us. Even if we could convince him to attend our modest community college, that would only delay his inevitable departure by one or two years. We knew our town could not contain him. And still one further level of the unfathomable: another city would experience his smell, would proudly claim it as their own, just as some unknown town before ours had.

Then the disaster. Though we at first vilified one man, we came to understand that his crime was this shared fear made manifest. Geoff Mossburg was a seventy-one-year-old retired electrician who had been living in our town all his life. He'd married his high school sweetheart and raised three sons, all of whom had excelled in school and who now had families of their own in other cities. Geoff played golf three days a week and low-stakes poker on Saturdays. He had quit smoking years ago but still enjoyed bottomless pizza and beer night at the VFW. On the morning of the disaster, he was volunteering as a crossing guard near the elementary school. "Just to make sure I get out of bed," he winkingly told people.

A crowd of students was crossing with Jake, so there was no lack of witnesses. When asked at the trial to describe Mr. Mossburg's demeanor, Jemina Bowles said, "He looked like he needed to go to the bathroom." Stop sign raised, his eyes darted over the group of children and landed on Jake. As I wrote earlier, Jake was more than accustomed to his local celebrity, but he told the jury that this look seemed different, "Almost like a dog right before it growls." Jake quickened his pace once he'd passed warily by the crossing guard. The children heard a clatter as the stop sign fell to the asphalt. Mr. Mossburg caught up to Jake, carried him to Jo Horkin's front lawn, held him down, and pulled off the boy's shoes. Jake barely had time to scream before Mr. Mossburg had pocketed his socks and hurried off.

The climate towards Geoff Mossburg on the first day of the trial was noticeably chilly. A crowd gathered outside the courthouse – an old structure that dominates our quaint town square – and yelled insults as the police escorted Mr. Mossburg from and later back to the awaiting squad car. Someone threw what turned out to be a handful of clothespins.

Jake was not present that day in court, but he was brought in on day two to describe the strange attack. The mini-mob was placated by the smell that continued to blossom outside after Jake was lead through the front door of the courthouse. The jury smiled distantly, Judge Millhouse rested his gavel, and Mr. Mossburg struggled to the point of tears not to relapse there in front of everyone. The prosecuting attorney, Janet Sujek, immediately sensed her error – but didn't seem too upset with herself. The effect was obvious; having the smell there in front of us, cooped up by the old building's terrible ventilation, made us all very understanding. How could we condemn Mr. Mossburg when all of us were fighting against the same urge? Derrick Beam called himself as a spontaneous witness in Mr. Mossburg's defense, admitting that, as Jake's barber, he saved every towel he used to line the boy's collar before unfurling his bib.

A hasty ruling was arrived at: Mr. Mossburg would quit his volunteer position as a crossing guard and never come within smelling distance of Jake – we called it a "restraining odor" – and the trial quickly turned into more of a town hall meeting in which we all tried to figure out how to best confront the issue. The idea we came up with was that, if an artful enough fabrication could be concocted, the city could administer the unction as a harmless enough substitute for those who, like Mr. Mossburg, required one.

One voice of dissent quieted everyone's self-congratulation. The man who stood up was Frank Okurowski, our local black sheep. He had lived his whole life in our town, and

we had watched him fail to grow out of a mischievousness that had, at the time, been charming because of his youth. Alcohol had led to drugs, and he had lost the job his late father had secured for him in construction when the police raided his ramshackle house on a tip that he was cooking. He'd been in and out of prison, and he could be found most days, bottle-in-bag, at the bus stop near the Books 'n' More. An addiction to nasal spray had completely destroyed Frank Okurowski's sense of smell.

He actually looked like he had tried to make himself presentable that day. Come to think of it, none of us had seen him at his usual outpost for at least a month. Maybe he was getting help. No amount of soap and water could remove the lines that hard living had drawn on his face, but his hair was clean and newly clipped. He wore a turtleneck and grey slacks with black dress shoes. Murmurs coursed through the courthouse – but not too loud; we wanted to hear what Frank had to say. His words were memorized.

“People might be tempted not to listen to me because I've made so many mistakes in my life. But for just a minute, consider that that makes me an expert in mistake-making. Maybe I'm the most qualified person here to diagnose this huge mistake we're all taking part in.”

Some people were already done listening, and began to make this known.

“And I'm not alone.” Five individuals flanking Frank Okurowski stood in solidarity. There was Dr. Yonkus, an anesthesiologist, Rabbi Rosenbaum, Fr. John, Driscoll Ammer, a local playwright and renowned debauchee, and Clark Sykes, Jake's P.E. teacher. We found out later that a seventh was supposed to stand – Claudia Milner, a marriage counselor – but that Jake's proximity had overwhelmed her resolve.

“Sympathetic I most certainly am,” Okurowski continued, then pointed at Mr. Mossburg, “but this man attacked a boy, and he has committed a crime.”

“Another area of expertise?” Janet Sujek jabbed. Some laughter, some applause.

“Absolutely,” Okurowski nodded. “And as an addict, I know that the only way to gain control of yourself is to remove the temptation.”

The room was sickly silent at the idea's implications. “And how do you suggest we... remove this temptation?” Judge Millhouse asked the obvious question.

“By asking the Longaways to leave our town permanently,” Clark Sykes answered.

Our town government approved our proposal to bring in an adroit perfumer from New York City. A prim, fashionable, seemingly humorless man, he arrived in a U-Haul loaded with a moon-shaped white desk with four tiered shelves. He and what we later were told was his perfumer's organ were installed in the Gaslamp Inn, where his heavy chest yielded nearly a hundred corked, amber-colored vials. On each was written, in a spidery hand, the captured scent. Mr. Castel – that was the perfumer's name – requested to see Jake privately in his chambers, but of course Mrs. Longaway would not allow this, and so Mr. Castel permitted her to accompany Jake under the condition that she thoroughly bathe beforehand without soap or shampoo, and that she wear clothes that likewise had been cleaned without soaps. Mrs. Longaway assured him that she was not currently menstruating. She also agreed to leave several articles of Jake's clothing in his keeping.

Then, three months of silence. Mr. Castel had his meals delivered to him in his room, and his only other contact with the outside world were couriered packages to or from New York. A cartoon in our local paper showed Mr. Castel in strung-out, romantic isolation, focused intensely on his scale and set of weights; the caption read "Maybe a pinch of salt." Finally the Gazette released, in a front-page story, the news that Mr. Castel had successfully reproduced Jake's odor, and would uncork his masterpiece at a gala event to be held in the town square the following week. Everyone was invited. Two days later, though, the Gazette's printed cancellation of the gala dampened the excitement and planning that had been building since the announcement. Though the story claimed that Mr. Castel had been forced to return to New York due to a nervous breakdown – which might well have been true – we knew that the real reason for the cancellation was that Mr. Castel had tried out the scent on a test group of locals and had met with downright hostility. We knew this because I knew this – I was in the test group.

The smell was ninety-nine percent the same as Jake's – but instead of that one percent becoming lost in the cologne's overwhelming success, it seemed to mutiny against the smell, becoming more and more accentuated, until that one percent was all you could smell. That one percent was my high school carpool having bought some cheap cigarillos instead of the cloves he liked to smoke. I asked the others in the test group what that one percent smelled like, and here's what we agreed on: phoniness, disrespect, vulgarity.

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Nepenthe

Everyone in town did eventually get to sample Mr. Castel's creation. A bigwig in the New York perfume business purchased the recipe at an exorbitant price and marketed it under the name *Nepenthe*. A teenage pop star attached his name to the label. Everyone's initial reaction was outrage that Jake had been commodified, that our town's proud secret had been suddenly disseminated worldwide. But we laughed off our outrage when we realized that the fragrance was an impostor, that our secret was safe. Some speculated, however, that the whole test group and the release of *Nepenthe* was a complicated ruse. Mr. Castel's senses were too attuned, his perfumer's organ too formidable, to have failed at his task. They hypothesized that the real *Nepenthe* was a secret being kept by the government for the purpose of subduing large groups of agitators, or possibly that the bigwig was selling it at an extreme price to only the millionaires who could afford the real thing.

Jake's family moved out of our town under the cover of a cool autumn night – for of course that is how this story was always going to end. The next morning, I leaned out my bedroom window to clip the out-of-control ivy that risked twining its destructive way into the window's mechanisms (it grew at an amazing pace overnight, latching onto my newly painted trim with alien tendrils), and I was struck by an absence. Like everyone in our town, what I noticed was a lack of noticing. People poured into the streets, morning cup of coffee in hand, to discuss why we all felt that this day was going to be different than the ones that came before it. Many of us skipped work.

News came down to us that there was a for-sale sign in front of the Longaway's house. We were all plunged into the tension of a mutual agony that we all knew had to remain private. We had lost Jake Longaway because we had not been able to control ourselves. A bidding war ensued, and by noon the house had sold for three times its value to the richest man in town, Avery Capaldi. By two o'clock, a security force was in place guarding the property. By the end of the week, an iron gate had been thrown up around the house. By November, an inflatable dome. Avery had been a very social man, and could be found most nights at O'Fallons, but from that day forward he secluded himself in the Longaway house, and all claims to having seen him around town seemed desperate and unlikely.

Jake's scent was not the only absence that vexed our senses. With him gone, we all realized how bland we had allowed our town to become. It was completely scoured of smells, of personality, of flavor. Some even panicked, thinking that we had all lost our senses of smell. A suggestion from one of Jake's classmates sent many of us to the nearest gas station, where we slopped the rainbow liquid on the pavement and breathed deeply of an odor both brand new and distantly familiar. We uncovered other smells as well: at the neglected arboretum's Compass Rose, at a bakery that had managed to stay open on Main Street, in the cluttered drawers where we tossed the detritus of school supplies. I raked my front yard and burned the leaves.

People dealt with the pain of Jake's departure in their own ways. A week after the Longaway's flight, our town experienced its first suicide in over fifteen years when the six-foot-four center on the high school basketball team, Ben Zale, hanged himself. As he did not leave a suicide note, we couldn't prove that his death had anything to do with Jake, and we were left to attribute it to the teenage angst felt most acutely by those who have the least reason to feel it.

Some looked for more constructive answers. What started out as clandestine self-help groups quickly mobilized into quasi-religions. The Apologists believed that Jake would one day return to the town and reward them for their faith. They held daily meditation sessions. They continued to purge their life of, not just odors, but of tastes, textures, and music. They sabotaged our paper mill. They looted any stores that sold *Nepenthe* and even attacked residents who cloaked themselves in what they called "The False Idol." A splinter sect of the Apologists, the Devotees, believed they needed to "go out into the world" to search for Jake Longaway. They had our perfumer, Mr. Castel, working for them from New York City, reporting the sales of perfume and cologne worldwide. Any time a precipitous plummet occurred, the Devotees would hurry to the destination. "But most of all," one Devotee told me, hoping to convince me that their faith was grounded in more than just consumer trends, "we follow our noses. The nose knows." That was their mantra. Others, energized by an evangelized Frank Okurowski, used the Devotees' continued failure to argue that the Longaways had not been flesh-and-blood humans at

all, that they existed in the realm of the supernatural. A final group – much more shadowy and nebulous – had only one goal: to locate the real *Nepenthe* fragrance withheld from us by Mr. Castel.

Most of us, however, retreated silently into our daily routines, buoyed by the new wealth of local odors we began to rediscover. But sometimes when the wind kicks up – or when it dies down completely – we swear we catch a whiff of Jake Longaway, possibly borne off a tree he climbed with friends, or a glove he left beneath a movie theater seat. Or maybe *Nepenthe* has begun to fool our forgetful noses. Either way, we breathe deeply and remember. And momentarily we forgive ourselves – for everything.

Joe Sacksteder would never have submitted this story if he'd thought somebody would publish it. He has recently made the same mistake with *Rio Grande Review*, *Big Muddy*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Mississippi Review*, and *Hawaii Review*. He would love for you to check out his Werner Herzog sound poems on *Sleeping Fish*, *The Collagist*, *textsound*, and *Queen Vic Knives*. He teaches at Eastern Michigan University.

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