

# **Smells Like Trouble**

A Short Story

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How does one know that their experience of the world is the same as everyone else's? She recalls the conversation with a friend – how Paul swore it was grey when she was seeing a muddy green.

You don't know, she decides, not unless there's a linguistic reference point ... a green or a grey to anchor the conversation.

She's read about a woman who can smell Parkinson's. The skin gives off a musky odour in the early stages of the disease, and her natty nose picks it up. If scientists can identify the molecular signature of that odour, it'll speed up diagnosis and treatment.

Her own situation is tricky.

She can smell trouble.

What trouble smells *like*, she can't say. Sweet, fruity, fishy, rancid, faecal, or musky, like with the Parkinson's? Any one of those would help because it would give her a language through which to articulate the problem.

As a child she avoided certain others, could detect their corruption with her nose. She hadn't learned the name for it, but recognized its presence as clearly as cut grass, her mum's chicken cacciatore, and the mess the dog left on the lawn.

Sometimes the odour took her breath away. More frequently it was an irritant.

That others seemed oblivious to the obvious perplexed her. Only later did it occur to her that perhaps her nasal prescience was unusual.

Awareness of what that smell meant, and what to call it, came in her early twenties. She'd graduated with a first in Journalism from Goldsmiths. Remaining in London without a job was out of the question so she'd headed home to Norwich. The internship with the *Eastern Daily Press* had paid peanuts, but peanuts were better than nothing.

She spent a year covering the courts. Most of the cases were dull as ditch water. Until Dale Culver took the stand.

Culver had bludgeoned a homeless man to death for nothing more than being in his way.

In his closing remarks, the judge described Culver as a menace with a psychopathic personality disorder and sentenced him to twenty years at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Culver's pathology had been an olfactory assault. She'd gagged throughout the proceedings.

That was ten years ago. Since then, she's researched the condition extensively. The terminology around psychopathy is tangled and confusing, more so than the throwaway lines in TV dramas would have anyone believe. Lack of empathy and emotional disconnection are almost

always evident. Violence not so much. Popular career paths include sales, media ... and law.

And that's the thing. The trouble she's smelling isn't always the big-hitting stuff – things you can go to the police with. You can't arrest someone because they're manipulative, or a persistent liar, or ruthless, or because they charm you into doing things you'd rather not, even if that charm leads to harm.

Which explains why she smells trouble so often. In fact, it's difficult to work out who's worthy of her trust, of her investment, and what action to take.

Like that Culver case. He was a menace, no doubt. But he wasn't the only one in the room. She knows that now. Her attribution might have been misplaced.

Just last week she attended a wedding. Ten years on and there she was, tarted up to the nines and trying to hold the retch in her throat as the judge who'd presided over the case walked down the aisle with the bride on his arm.

Maybe he's violent; maybe he's not. Either way, the thought of someone like *that* invested with so much power itches furiously. He has no right. Something needs to be done, though she has yet to work out what. One thing's for sure – it's unacceptable.

*Unacceptable.* Not frightening or disgusting or disturbing. Yet surely it should be all those things. And that's another problem right there. Like with the Paul and the colours, it seems her perspective is off.

Her own odour is telling: familiar, so it doesn't make her gag, but she recognizes it for what it is. Not sweet, fruity, fishy, rancid, faecal or musky. Just trouble.

She smells a little like trouble.