Pet Scents

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The Missouri Review, Volume 45, Number 4, Winter 2022, pp. 164-176
(Article)

Published by University of Missouri
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mis.2022.0058*

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I'm on call today. The sun just rose up like a god from behind Bell Rock, and I'm in my rock-pocked blue Volvo with my name scrolled in white on the side. My first stop is Dolores Flores's place, where she has an old Yorkie that's been acting up. I've met the Yorkie twice, and he's on his way out. Not much I can do but give him a peaceful time of it. The thing people don't realize about smaller dogs, terriers in particular, is that somewhere in their tiny hearts they know they could've been big if they weren't bred to be so ratlike. They don't forget, and they want blood, and fortunately I have just that in a vial for little Handsome today.

I've been an animal aromatherapist since before aromatherapy was a thing, before people talked about healing this, healing that. I didn't get my degree in veterinary medicine, though I did some clerical work for a vet one summer in Akron. And I didn't get a license in mysticism or feng shui, though I might've tried if they'd things like that back then. Instead I got my MBA. I'm a businesswoman, and I ended up in a good place for it at a time when, as people here might say, the planets were aligned.

The Floreses live out on Wolf Mesa Road, in the country-club part of town. I park across the street since Dolores asked me to leave the driveway free for her husband to pull in. My Volvo crunches over the red gravel. I always think my car is going to pulverize the rocks, turn them to powder, but I get out and they're the same, small and tough and whole. Dolores is waiting in her arched doorway, and you can see the real red rocks—the giant, powerful ones—looming above her head. Supposedly all the energy in the country is harnessed and pulsing like the nation's heartbeat over Airport Road. The planets are supposed to line up over the vortex there soon, and when they do, I'll have to feign interest. People want their healers to be into that stuff, so I hang quartz around my neck, wear my hair loose. I have a closet full of flowing skirts with tiny bells and three earth-toned, blocky pairs of Birkenstocks. But the weird thing about what I do, the thing that freaks me out, is that it works: the animals get better.

Dolores has Handsome in her arms and is waving one of his paws at me. I lug my stuff out and wave back. I carry my things around in a wicker basket, though it might be more convenient to use a briefcase. But I can't—no hippie chicks with briefcases allowed around here. And worse, as I'm slamming my trunk, I see my faded bumper sticker that says *My Other Car Is a Broom!* Just like that, exclamation point and all.

"He's so listless, Sally. Just lays there on the sofa." Dolores is in her midsixties, wearing a lime-green Izod shirt and an ironed calf-length jean skirt. Her hair is swept up in stiff gray waves, and a pair of pink glasses hangs from her neck on a beaded string. I look past her and see the evidence—glasses of half-drunk iced tea, L.L. Bean catalogs, pillows stacked, blankets rumpled—and realize that it isn't the dog who's been on the couch for days.

She sees me looking. "I've been keeping him company there, poor monkey. You just love your widdle couchie, don't you?" she asks him. Handsome, offended, looks away. "My husband should be back from his golf trip any minute now, and when he gets here, he'll take Handsome for a walk, but in the meantime, I'm scared. The coyotes, you know." Dolores talks like she's on speed.

"Why don't you just let him out in the backyard?" I ask her, reaching for the dog. He squirms in my hands. I judged you wrong, Widdle Monkey, I think. You've got some life left.

"Because I'm telling you, Sally, those coyotes are back. Joan Handke down the road saw one staring through the Venetian blinds at her poodle."

Dolores plucks at her glasses, fingers fumbling for something to do without Handsome. I have to be delicate—Dolores wants a reason to stay on the couch all day, and I'm supposed to give her one. The dog whines. I know Joan and her poodle too and don't believe the coyote bit for a second. Coyote rumors run wild around here—I think of the trickster stories, the ones where things aren't what they seem and everyone's got something up their sleeve or under their paw, and imagine Coyote himself busy gossiping about lost poodles and Yorkies who fell into wells. I picture Coyote on the phone, twirling his whiskers and telling Joan Handke that he's been spotted up the road.

"How about I take him for a sec and watch him real closely while I prepare a tincture."

Dolores watches us go out the sliding door. I prefer large breeds, but you should see little Handsome run along the fence. His gray-blue coat shines, and he's got his ink-drop eyes on those quail. I make him a mixture. Half an ounce of squirrel blood, some spring water, and herbs. The bottle's as big as my thumb, and I'll charge $140 for it, plus the extra twenty for a house call. Handsome hovers nearby while I go through the routine of measuring, stirring with a silver toothpick-sized spoon I got long ago at an estate sale. I place my hand on his square head, and, knowing Dolores is watching—I see her shadow pacing on the crabgrass—I administer a drop above each of his Groucho eyebrows, then let him sniff the bottle. Here's the miracle—the dog rolls over, starts scooching his back along the grass. I feel a spark in my chest, a twitch of pride.

"Look at that!" Dolores says from behind my shoulder. "He's like a puppy again. So much more effective than those nasty pills." Up until a month ago, when I told her to knock it off, Dolores had been feeding Handsome her Prozac. They made him shake his head as if he had a fly in his ear.

I screw the lids back on my bottles. "Put one drop on his collar twice a day. Call me if he sinks back into a depression."

"Thanks so much, Sally." Dolores hands me the money but looks hesitant.

"It would really help," I say, "if you could walk him more, get him away from that couch." I don't say whom it will help. Her husband's always golfing, and she's never had a job, and bridge once a week can't keep you sane. Her face lights up, and I think how amazing it is that people want to be told how to live their lives.

On the way out, I see Joan Handke inspecting my car, her poodle cradled in her suntanned arms.

"Looking for predators?" I ask, coming up behind her.

"Great goodness," Joan says as she spins around. Her wrinkles are buried under orange powder, and her smile is as artificial as mine.

"I was just checking up on Handsome," I say, hunting around in my basket.

"Sad, isn't it?" Joan says, burping her poodle.

"I think he'll be fine, actually. He just needs a walk."

"Not the dog, the *husband*. Left two weeks ago." Joan leans closer to me. "Ran off with the daughter of one of his bank partners. Dolores won't leave the house in case he comes back while she's gone."

I try to control my surprise—I hate gossip, probably because I've been the subject of it too often—and I finally find my keys, which are at the bottom of my basket and stuck with honey from a broken flask. As I drive away, I see Joan staring into bushes and past the cacti, searching for coyotes, for purpose.

On the way back to town, dust the color of bloodshed clouding my rearview, I stop by my ex-husband, Beat's, place, which, until a year ago, used to be mine too. He lives fashionably close to the central vortex. His name is really Bert, but he changed a letter and now he's a local. When we moved here five years ago, we didn't know how we'd manage in this New Age wonderland, but all it took was a few affairs and a divorce.

"If it isn't old Sally Sunshine," he says when I pull in. He's in the drive in flowy gray shorts and no T-shirt. His beard's down to his nipples now, and he's painting his mailbox turquoise.

"Nice color." Turquoise is always on sale at the Valley Value Hardware store. The McDonald's arches here are turquoise; the sky too. If I believed in auras, I'd say Beat's was turquoise. It used to be a nice deep maroon.

“I got it on sale,” he smiles. “There’s some left over if you’d like.”

I light a slightly bent cigarette and blow smoke in his face.

“Grow up, Sal,” he says, still smiling. The smile’s his new thing. Back in Ohio, it was the occasional sarcastic sneer and a lot of swearing, cases of Black Label beer and stomping around with his hands fisted up in his motorcycle jacket pockets. I look closer and see that the gray shorts he’s wearing are actually a skirt. Coyote’s been here, I think, messing with my ex-husband. The thing that burns me up is that he looks as good as he used to.

“Sure, Bert.” I wonder why I’ve come—he helps me feel less alone, I guess. But that’s not it since he’s so unfamiliar now. He’s fashioned a new person for himself out of turquoise and tipis, hammered copper and crystals. When we first moved here, we had the idea of going into business: he’d make green-patina sculptures of cowboys and Kokopellis and I’d sell them. But he went too far in. Now his pieces are all over town; they go for thousands, and he keeps making more. So I suppose I come because he shows me that at least *I* haven’t changed. I do this aromatherapy thing, but I’m still somewhere under these flowered smocks; I’m still visible behind the fog of incense. I look for Bert beneath his skirt and can’t find him anywhere.

“Beat, Sally. Please.”

“But you’re Bert.” I want to piss him off, get him going, but he just smiles and tamps the lid back onto his paint can with a screwdriver. Out of the house comes Windy in a sundress. My stomach flops like a caught fish when she reaches her hands out for mine. I show her my cigarette by way of refusal, and she wraps her arms around Bert’s chest.

“I’m not,” Bert says, stroking one of Windy’s tawny arms. Her biceps are shaped like avocados. She is beautiful, really, and I can’t stand her.

“Not what?” I say, averting my eyes from Windy—it hurts to know that what she has is what I had. Except, very possibly, better.

“I’m not Bert, okay?” He’s smiling again like I’m a child.

I get the hell out and in my rearview mirror see him fiddling with the mailbox flag while Windy watches, resting her hand upon his tanned back and smiling his smile.

My next stop is the Valley Value Hardware store, where Jim Wattani has an alley cat. Cats are easy—catnip and seaweed. I throw in a little sage and juniper so that while they’re wearing the scent they can blend in with this scrubby desert.

Jim Wattani is wearing a pair of holey jeans and a black T-shirt, and his prematurely gray hair sticks up in the back like a fence. He talks like a cross between a Clevelander and a redneck, though he was born in the next town over. His shop is a dusty mess of bolts and paint and sun-faded camping supplies.

"Came to get some of that turquoise paint," I yell into the back of the store.

"Screw that color," Jim yells back. He comes out holding the cat by the scruff of its neck. "And screw this cat. Won't catch any mice. He's got some mange, but that's the only thing rough about him."

"It's a girl," I say, inspecting the animal, "and she's pregnant."

"No way. It's an alley cat. It's supposed to be male."

"Let me see this alley," I say.

He leads me out back, and I see the problem. The alley is lined with wicker furniture. Sun streams down to touch two green garbage bins that look like they've been washed and waxed. Paintbrush flowers twist their way out of cracks.

"This isn't a real alley, Jim." I see I'm going to have to change the scent—milk and honey and a tinge of cod liver oil. No sage or juniper now because we don't want her running off.

"Goddamn."

"Put a sign in the window. There's lots of lonely people here who'd love a kitten. Then get her spayed."

"You want one?" Jim says.

"Maybe." I suppose this is an admission, but with Jim I can let down the old guard.

"Will all your other pets get along with it?"

"No other pets," I say, revealing more.

"How come?" Jim pushes down his bifocals.

"I don't really—"

The shop bell rings, and a short white-haired woman comes in, so I take the cat and go to the alley to mix her scent. She lies on my sandals and purrs, her blob of a belly vibrating against my toes. I apply a comfrey balm for her mange, and Jim comes back out.

"Sorry about that," he says. "What were you saying?"

I hand the cat over. "Give her a name and she'll feel more at home. Put this balm on her ass twice a day and call me when the kittens come."

"You sure we were done talking?"

"Pretty sure," I say and leave with a wave, sixty dollars richer.

So. I don't like animals. Sharing my life with them seems pointless. They can turn on you quicker than Bert can change his name. I'm thinking all this as I drive home for lunch, wondering why I almost confessed to Jim Wattani. A slip like that could cost me my livelihood.

My house, also my business headquarters, is outside town on the banks of the Colorado, which is down to the size of a stream by the time it passes my cottage. I've got crystals strung up in the trees; they catch the light to send rainbows flying. They catch customers too. In my backyard I watch the river scattering the sun and sky, drowning the clouds. My yard is amazing, and looking at it, for a second I understand as clear as the shallow pools here why Bert and I split up: in Ohio we were young. We had things to do, places to go. And now we've done them, gotten here. There's no point in being travel partners when you're staying put.

In my tiny kitchen I listen to my messages while I fry bologna. Bologna's hard to find here—I have to get mine at the IGA by Crested Butte. When I was growing up there was bologna everywhere. Like the sniffling colds that traveled back and forth in the lunchroom, all the kids had it. Now I put a big smear of mayonnaise on a slice of coveted Wonder bread and write down phone numbers as my landline blurts them out. I check my calendar and see that tomorrow night is the big night—the planets and moon are supposed to line up behind the big rock and Jesus will come in his spaceship, holding hands with the Buddha and Hitler, a Virginia Woolf book under his arm and an endless stack of Visa cards to dole out.

I finish up the day by administering sulfur to a nervous ferret out on Highway 56, getting myself a massage in return for giving lavender drops to an overgrown tabby owned by Crystal Jade of Hands On You, then running into Windy at the co-op, where she's squeezing eggplants. This town used to be bigger, I think, before Windy turned up.

"Sally!" she says, weighing tomatoes in each hand, the goddess of vegetable justice. "You want to come by for dinner? Beat would love it."

"Thanks, but you and I seem to have different ideas about what he'd love," I say, trying to keep the edge out of my voice, "and besides, I have to get ready for tomorrow night. You know, the whole Big Bang business, but backward?" I push off toward the register. Windy makes me nervous; she's too young, too nice, too not me.

I spend the rest of the evening playing moody old Jesus and Mary Chain albums. Bert and I used to listen to them in our two-room apartment in Akron; we'd make cheap spaghetti and share a bottle or two of red table wine while waiting for the snow to quit falling. Now Beat says he can't listen to songs with words. "Don't you think it's funny," I said when we split up and he handed the orange crates full of vinyl over to me, "that you've been reincarnated without dying? You skipped a step." He smiled, of course, and patted my arm.

In the morning I jolt awake. Tonight is the big alignment, and things are going to be ridiculous around here. Already I can hear cars revving on the highway half a mile away. The machine clicks on, and Dolores Flores's voice moans onto the tape that Handsome's dying. I don't believe it; she doesn't sound frantic enough, but after I make pancakes and take a shower, I get on the road to Wolf Mesa because desperate people pay. Traffic's snarled around every bend. I see a Whopper wrapper lying on the ground, and someone in front of me flicks a cigarette out the window while we're stalled. Though I don't give two figs about most of the people in this town, I hate to see people trashing the place. I honk my horn until I see it's Jim Wattani—him I can forgive. He smokes American Spirits with cotton filters, and we're not currently in a drought. Plus he's cute.

"Sally," Jim yells out his window, "what are you doing tonight?"

"Vortex," I say.

"Wanna go with me? We can take some beers and watch people have convulsions or whatever's supposed to happen?"

"Sure," I say. My stomach fills with a sloshing pink feeling. "I don't know when the last time I went on a date was," I call out, but he's getting back in his truck; just as well. Also, I do know: in the long-ago, pre-Bert times.

We're moving again until an ambulance comes out of nowhere. Cars drive over into ditches and get stuck among the cacti, and Jim Wattani pulls off at his store, but I find that by following the ambulance, I can get to Wolf Mesa quicker. As I turn down the gravel street, I see Joan Handke out in the road clutching her poodle like it's a handbag someone's been trying to steal. Her face is frightening without its usual layer of cake makeup; it takes me a second to get used to, and then I realize she looks much better. Her dog shakes under his fleece vest.

I follow the ambulance to Dolores Flores's driveway and watch them push a stretcher through her front door. Old Handsome rips out of the house and leaps at my legs. His little steely blue body knocks into my knees, and I scoop him up.

"Coyote?" I say to Joan Handke, though I'm aware this is illogical.

"Jim Beam and sleeping pills," she says. Her lips grow so thin they look like they've been sketched onto her face with a red ballpoint.

We watch the paramedics load the stretcher into the ambulance. They move more gracefully than they do in movies, a slow dance in ghost-white uniforms. I realize they're moving that way because there isn't anything to hurry up and save. A gray hand falls from beneath the sheet to drop a pair of pink glasses. Something about the way the colors clash wakes me up. I put Handsome down and open the car door. If he jumps in, he's mine, I think, and he's behind the wheel before I can finish the thought.

"A fucking dog," I say to myself driving back. I try to feel sadder about Dolores, but the shock hasn't worn off. I wonder if I hadn't made pancakes, if there hadn't been so much traffic, if there was something I could have said yesterday. Perhaps if I'd confessed, told her I don't like animals, that my mixtures are full of shit rather than healing power, that there's nothing to me, I could have saved her. Perhaps if Joan Handke and I had gone into her living room, informed Dolores that we were both fakes, that the whole world was half a lie, and then done a nice tango on the Saltillo tile, things would have been different. But I remember the excited look on her face when she talked about the coyotes; she didn't want to see truth out there, she didn't want reality to come pushing its way past the prickly pears.

I drive by Beat's gleaming mailbox but don't stop. On second thought, I circle back around the block, open up my basket of aromatherapy ingredients, and slow down enough to dump a quart of beef blood onto the turquoise paint. With luck, it'll seep in and turn stubborn before he notices.

Now the sky over Airport Road seems green and shimmery. Beneath it are people clad in scarves or in polo shirts and khakis, whispering *sat nam* or filming the traffic.

"Lookie there, Handsome," I say to him, and he sticks his little gray Lenin beard out the window.

I check in at Jim Wattani's and help him make a nest for his cat in the alley, a cozy wine box under the wicker chaise, where no one will bother her. He tells me he'll pick me up at six and asks what kind of beer.

"Any and all of them."

"That helps," he says. "Whose dog?" He nods at Handsome, who's outside the shop, pissing dangerously on an ocotillo.

I make a series of helpless gestures, involving rolling my eyes, shrugging, and plucking at my skirt. I've turned into a mime, imitating a real person.

Jim picks me up just after I've wiped up a spot Handsome left on the rug and starts going through the records.

"Whose is this?" he asks, pulling out Black Sabbath's *Vol. 4*.

"Mine," I say, "of course."

He looks pleased and gives me the goat horns.

I look around my place as if I've forgotten something, someone.

We drive the back way to the vortex. Cars and vans and RVs are all over the road and off it, lawn chairs are being tugged from trunks, and doors shut with a beep. Jim leaves the windows of his truck down, and we hike up the hill with Handsome panting like he's about to pass out. I stop to give him some water in a telescoping cup.

"You're great with animals, whether you like them or not." Jim bends to give Handsome a careful noogie, his big knuckles spiking up the fur.

"Will you just look at all this crazy," Jim says once we get to the top and gaze down. Tourists pepper the landscape. A group of white-gauzed people are chanting. Younger kids have lugged their conga drums into a circle to beat them hesitantly. Above our heads, the sun bouncing off the rocks is as orange as Joan Handke's makeup. A little girl and her father perched on the next boulder over are singing "Rainbow Connection" with the help of their phone.

I want Dolores here so I can tell her, *See? See all the beauty, despite all the ugly? See the way the moon and the sun hang together in the sky, giving us stupid, lying people all their light?*

"Let us pray," I tell Jim Wattani as he hands me a cold Oak Creek lager.

"To whom?" he asks.

"To Handsome." At the sound of his name, Handsome comes back from the edge of the cliff where he's been sniffing. He sits at our feet.

"Forgive us, Handsome," Jim Wattani says. I'm impressed.

"Please, Handsome," I say, not knowing how to finish.

"May the coyotes leave you alone."

"And the sun keep you warm."

"And the wind cool you." I shiver when Jim Wattani says this, and he puts his jean jacket over my shoulders. Handsome looks at us with his head cocked until voices burst from the cliff's edge. People are straggling up the face to watch the planets swirl like dumplings in their soupy sky, to get here before the aliens do. I reach into the cooler and then freeze as Beat surfaces behind a crag.

"Sally!" he says, his movements halted by surprise. But then he reaches his hand down and yanks up not Windy but a small bikini-clad redhead. Her skin is covered in green paint, and her eyes are smudged with black, a messy witch. The force of Beat's pull makes her fall onto a rock and start giggling. I look up at Beat, and he shrugs, then makes a face. The last of the daylight distorts him, but I'm pretty sure what I see—it's the old Ohio sneer, the one that reminds me where I am and how far I've come.

"Whose dog is that?" Bert asks.

"Mine," I say.

Handsome lies down next to me and starts gnawing stones. Jim Wattani closes his eyes and taps out "War Pigs" on my knee. The sun goes down for good, and the sky seems as amazing as any other night. I look over the edge. At the bottom of the rock, no one has moved. The tourists with their sunburned bald spots and their lawn chairs, the yogis knotted into lotus positions, the kids with their arms wrapped around their drums—they are all quiet with waiting, hoping for the end of the world, the beginning of their lives, for some trickster to lead them the long way home.

DINA GUIDUBALDI

This story, "Pet Scents," was written back when I was spending lots of time in Sedona, quite a strange place. I've always cared about setting in fiction (often to the detriment of plot). I forget who it was that said basically, "Every good story is the theme of its location," but I believe that. So, Sedona is—or was, when I wrote this long ago—this stunningly gorgeous town that had been overrun with retirees and transplants and assorted crackpots, and it fascinated me. Was its attractiveness damaged by this population or enhanced by it? Were the people who lived there influenced in any sort of genuinely positive way by their surroundings, or did Sedona just squash them with its magnificence? Did Sedonans really wake up every day to do deep breathing exercises and hike eight miles and chug bee-pollen smoothies, or were they sitting around like I would be, hiding in the dark and avoiding things? I don't know, but I do like that my narrator actually has some innate hippie healing talents, whether she likes it or not. Maybe we're all a little better than we think we are.

Dina Guidubaldi grew up in Kent, Ohio. She moved to Texas for the sunshine (watch what you wish for!) and to get her MFA at Texas State University. Her first story collection, *How Gone We Got*, was published in 2015, and she's just finished her second. She teaches at St. Edward's University in Austin and lives in a purple house.