

My name is Dutch, and I used to be the best damn nose on the force.

Note: not 'used to have the best nose'. I was the Nose, and the Nose was me.

"Dutch can smell a lie at ten paces," they used to say, and while that wasn't strictly true, I could catch the sour, acid undertones of fear on a suspect's breath, a scent that rose to a crisp point as the untruth in a bunch of half-truths rolled from their mouth. I once had to pick a thief out of a rugby team, right after the match: twelve sweat-soaked men who'd been rolled in mud and pressed together in a grappling mass for eighty minutes, and I was after a single note of scent in that symphony, one fingerprint's worth of smell smeared on the corner of a locker in a changing-room bannered with damp towels and dirty socks. I got him the moment I opened the door.

But that's all over now. Pretty soon, I won't even be 'Dutch' any more. That's just the nickname I got because I'm the only Dutch Shepherd in my unit. Not very imaginative, I grant you, but I liked Dutch a lot better than my real name. Goodbye, Dutch. I'm going to miss you.

On the morning of June 6th, I was proceeding northeast along the A31...no. Don't do this like a crime report. I won't be writing any more of those. I just came in to clear my desk, but when I turned my computer on to wipe the hard drive I found I felt like typing up some sort of record.

Four months, three weeks and two days ago, I was chasing a suspect in my patrol car. It had rained before dawn and the smells were pushing up from the ground like fresh green shoots: young rabbits with the wind in their fur, oak leaves unfurling in the sun. The heavy, viscous smell of spilled diesel, a second too late.

I skidded on the exit of the Shepherd and Flock roundabout, crashed through the barrier and spun across the opposite carriageway. Shrill brakes and the smell of hot rubber before my own fear-sweat drowned everything else.

I woke up two days later with a bandaged head and no sense of smell.

The head healed. The Nose didn't. Post traumatic anosmia, the doctors called it. Severed olfactory nerves don't grow back. The smells are still out there; I can see them rising from a plate of steak or shimmering in diamonds above the dewy grass. But they pass through my nose without sparking a single synapse in my brain, where they used to flash and chime like a fruit machine with spinning reels and bells of smells that tumbled and whirred and lined up and paid out. The scents slide like ghosts through the fine hairs of my nasal passages, wisping off my tongue as I pant them away. I feel like a ghost myself - I can't smell myself, so how do I know I'm even there?

I had a human girlfriend years ago. It didn't work out - these things never do - but we were close for a while, and one night she tried to explain all the colours I can't see. She held up her clothes, wouldn't believe that I couldn't make out which top was orange, which yellow. She spoke of sunsets, gold and pink like a bird's breast; the rustling fire of an autumn forest; the blues and greens and greys that licked foam tips across the wobbling bowl of the sea. Then she felt sorry for me, and there were cuddles. Lots of cuddles.

But when I tried to tell her about the sense she was missing, how I could learn the story of her day by holding her top to my nose, never mind what colour it was, she just said "Gross!" and pulled away.

Because humans don't get our sense of smell, any more than they know what it's like to have a tail constantly broadcasting your emotions, they fear it and mythologise it. Human crooks go through all sorts of things to cover their scent from the police, ammonia, bleach, mutilate themselves for life sometimes, but I can smell through it all.

I could.

My human girl used to cover her scent with perfume, civet musk and artificial orange, but I could penetrate her disguise and smell the breadcrumb scent of her skin. It was strongest at the back of

her neck, where the hair began, and I liked to lay my muzzle in the base of her skull and just breathe her.

Scent memories. The house where you grew up; the candyfloss and flaking lead paint of a funfair; the chlorinated fear of a school swimming-pool on a bright cold summer day before lunch. The catalogue of smells that make up the girls in my life: the breadcrumb girl, the green-tea girl, the elderberry girl (she was a cat, and a big mistake). All gone.

The Home Office humans tried to insist I take a desk job, but as soon as I knew the Nose was gone for good I put my foot down for early retirement. What good's a desk sergeant who can't smell how his colleagues are feeling, or catch the fading scent of the mugger as he takes down the details of an assault? They'd have me filing the CS cases, the Cold Scents, down in some odourless vault. But my ears are all right. I'd still hear the whispers: there goes Dutch, used to be the best Nose on the force. I was offered counselling and so on, but none of it was going to bring the smells back, so I turned it all down.

This morning I got up, had a shower and put on a clean uniform. Since Becky left I've become paranoid about my own possible stink. I scrub until my pores gape open, lather-rinse-and-repeating the clags of oil and dander from the root of every hair so my brindle fur fluffs up, soft and rain-permeable. I probably don't even smell like Dutch any more. I've shed him like a winter coat, leaving the inner dog exposed: shivering, ridiculous and skinny.

Breakfast was tea and a bowl of cereal. I could taste the sugar in both, but none of the flavour. You don't realise until it's gone that taste is bound up in smell, like a carob bar in a wrapper. Can't open the wrapper, can't get the treat. The cereal crunched and popped in my mouth; I appreciate texture these days, now it's the only way I can distinguish between foods. The tea had a slight oily feel from the tannins.

Becky made me coffee, the morning she went for good. When I reached the dregs she screamed that it was dirt, she'd given me earth and hot water; snatched the mug and threw it at the wall. I've been on tea ever since. It tastes the same to me, delivers the same caffeine hit, and I can be pretty sure a teabag contains nothing but tea. No milk - milk can go sour while it still looks pure and innocent.

She said she was leaving because she couldn't stand my moping, but the truth is I couldn't satisfy her any more. I couldn't smell when she wanted me, what she wanted me to do, or whether she liked it when I did it. She had to guide me all the way, and Becky didn't want to work, just lie back and be worked on.

My walk to the station didn't stimulate me the way it used to. I wasn't looking forward to work, and I couldn't read the passing lines of scent, the sonnets, the limericks, the ballads and the half-rhymes. On the way I passed a young woman with her child in a pushchair and their doggy, a terrier, on a lead. The doggy sniffed my feet, lucky animal, looking up at me with glazed, happy eyes and that permanent smile they all have.

Once I would have known straight away what street they lived on, what they'd had for breakfast, which brand of soap the child's mother had used when she bathed it. Now I couldn't even tell its sex until it blurted "Doggy!" and reached for me, and its mother corrected it.

"No, Paul, that's a dog. A police dog. Buster is a doggy." At the sound of his name, the terrier whirled his stub tail and grinned wider.

I was still in uniform, for today, and community outreach was still one of my duties, so I removed my cap, bent down and allowed Paul to stroke my head, his fingers sticky with some unknown substance I could have identified without trouble five months previously.

"Police dogs are clever, Paul. Remember we read that story about a little girl who got lost, and the nice dog followed her scent and found her? That's what this dog does. He uses his nose."

My teeth smiled, and I put my cap back on.

With no scent cues I almost missed the group of nurses on the other side of the road, three labs and a Newfie, all girls. My ears and tail automatically cocked, and the bitches folded themselves into a giggling, protective pack.

Becky was a nurse, a Labradoodle. Smelled like muffins and daffodils. I feel sorry for her human patients, if she could treat another dog the way she treated me. Maybe she likes humans better.

When I reached the station, Charlie Whiskers was on duty. Cats mostly go in for surveillance stuff, and squeezing into places where they shouldn't be. Not nosework - not real policing. We despise them because they don't put their necks on the line, they despise us because we do. But everyone likes fat old ginger Charlie.

"Hello, Dutch! Good to have you back," he said, his white throat throbbing with purr.

"Well, it's not for long. Coming to my leaving do?"

"Wouldn't miss it, my old Dutch. I tried to visit you while you were off, you know, but your girlfriend..."

"Yeah. She's gone now," I told him. He nodded as though he already knew - probably did, Charlie gets all the goss. Didn't say he was sorry. I caught a glimpse of claw as he reached to press the button that would let me through the glass door for the final time.

Have you ever seen a flock of starlings take flight at dusk, among the trees and telephone lines? Thousands of them mass together and swoop apart, rising like fountains, scattering like mercury. The patterns look crazy, but if you're quick and keen you can fix your eye on one individual bird and follow its flight as it shuttles in and out of the web, watching until it stills and roosts. That was the smell of the police station for me, before. Now the air was empty.

I tried to sneak past Jazz's office, but the white shep's nose was in full working order and she boomed my name so I had to go in.

"Morning, Jazz. How's the Peabody enquiry going?" I made sure my face was square to hers and enunciated each syllable.

When Jazz was deafened by a gunshot at close range, she took her move to desk duties gracefully. She used to be my partner, now she's my boss, but I never envied her. Now I'm not so sure. Deafness is easier to mask than a lost sense of smell and she's a good lipreader, though sometimes she talks a little too loudly or mumbles her words.

I used to like her scent, a blend of almonds and marble. In a purely professional, friendly way, of course.

"Rotten. The labs are still working on the evidence, but there's precious little to go on, and the scents are cold now. We'll have to kill the case if we don't get a lead soon."

The shop talk flowed over me like a familiar, snuggly blanket, but I wasn't a part of it any more. I was sealed in my odour-free glass box, untouched and untouchable.

"Don't leave, Dutch!" Jazz yelled suddenly. I flicked my ears, our warning signal, and she overcompensated, dropping to a whisper so I had to bend my head close to hers. "I wish you'd reconsider your resignation. Don't run away from us - we're your friends. We respect you, Dutch! We love you!" She was too loud again, and my ears flattened with embarrassment. She'd said all this before, at various volumes, all the times she'd visited me in hospital and at home. I still wasn't budging.

"You all pity me," I told her, exaggerating the movement of my muzzle so my lips stood away from my teeth and spat her pity back in her face. "I don't need your pity."

"Quite right. You need a girl," Dandy said, entering unnoticed among all the shouting. He shook out his long ears with their curls of russet fur, and smirked.

Dandy is an explosives expert. He lives each day as though it were his last, which it could easily be. 'Bomb dog' is a romantic title, and there's no shortage of volunteers to assist him in his final wishes. It helps that he's a stunning looker, a liver-and-white springer with soulful, liquid eyes that belie his obsessive interest in shagging. He's had an awful lot of final wishes, that one.

"I can't get a girl. No dog would have me, and I'm done with humans. And cats," I added, knowing Dandy would if I didn't.

"You could get a doggy," he suggested, combing his feathered wrist with the claws on his other paw.

I've been on the force fifteen years; I know every filthy joke about dogs and doggies, and don't think I haven't noticed which of my colleagues laugh a little too loud and start to sweat between their toes when the subject comes up.

"No thanks," I said, and left the office.

"Tailwagger's Dandy Boy! Try thinking with your other brain for a change!" I heard Jazz bawling through the closed door. "The Home Office will chop your balls off if you don't look out!"

Oh, Dandy. Don't ever change.

My unit is mostly sheps and labs, with a few 'trievers. I used the back doors, which shut out scent until you're there on the floor. The yap of first-cuppa conversation fell silent in an outward ripple from me and my smell. Did I imagine it, or did even the phones stop ringing?

"Morning, boss! Coffee?" Creepy the bloodhound said, whipping the air with his tail. Creepy's another kind of specialist, a cadaver dog. He can nose out a body when it's nothing but a few rags of rotten flesh peeling from a skeleton, even in snow or under running water. Nobody really likes hanging out with him. He thinks it's because he smells of death, but the truth is that he's...well, creepy. Bless him, though, for reaching out to the untouchable one, while everyone else acts as if post traumatic anosmia was catching. Part of me has died, I suppose - he's going to be more comfortable with that than the others.

"Tea. Black," I said, and everything went normal, as if I'd given the password.

There'll be a cake somewhere, and a card, disguised in an internal mail envelope as it makes its slow round from inbox to inbox. If I could smell I'd already know what flavour icing they'd chosen, but I'd still act surprised and delighted when the box appeared.

I had a mug of tea with the team, letting the talk of scents and trails wash over me. This morning is all business, looking at the open cases and planning action points. Later, when the drink comes out, will be the time for Remember when old Dutch caught the bank robber by tracing the mud on his shoelace and That time Dutch smelled the murder weapon in the bonfire and dived in to snatch it out. Someone will probably hang up the wretched mirrorball that's been a staple of every office party since long before my time - since Block's time, probably.

When I could, I excused myself and shut myself into my office with the blind drawn, to clear my desk. Files for the shredder, files for the archive. The work laptop and mobile, the ID card in its wallet, the cap. Empty the pouches of my nylon belt: the Taser, the Speedcuffs, the pepper spray. Good thing I've lost the scent memories or I'd be drowning in nostalgia. As it is, I just feel lighter. Now one last job, while I'm still cleared to check out a firearm.

'Putting him out of his misery', the humans call it, when their doggy or kitty gets old and blind and starts to piddle everywhere. That old blind doggy's probably happier than me - he can still sniff a thousand stories out of a lamp post - but I've got something he hasn't: fingers. And I know how to use them. It's rough on Jazz and my team, but with any luck Creepy'll be the one to find me. He's good at this sort of thing, and

Charlie Whiskers came in while I was typing that last bit. Sidled through the door without knocking and parked his bum on my desk, swishing his stripy tail. I quickly tabbed into my mail and stared at four months' worth of unread messages.

His little pink nose wrinkled and I worried again that I stank, though what would a cat know?

"You smell nice," he told me. "You're like a cat for cleanliness, these days. What shampoo do you use?"

"What do you want, Charlie?"

He opened the folder in his lap and brought out an old photo, eight by ten, curly at the edges. Developed from film, not digitally printed. I took it between thumb and finger pads, knowing it smelled of a dozen metals and chemicals, getting none of them. A police unit looked out, eighteen uniformed officers in three rows, their faces bleaching with age.

"But they're humans," I said. "And...doggies." A line of sheps, black or golden, short- and long-coated, sat in front of the humans and grinned with their tongues out.

"Those were just dogs, then. Dogs like you weren't around yet. How did you think they dealt with criminals, before they had us to help?"

"Humans were the police? Humans put their necks on the line?" I felt outraged, cheapened by the knowledge.

"The other emergency services, too. How did you think society functioned before cats and dogs? Did you think there weren't any crimes? Fires? Accidents?"

"I thought...I didn't think."

Charlie passed me a slim book with a blue cardboard cover. POLICE TRAINING MANUAL, it said in chunky capitals.

I didn't open it. "How did they smell?" I asked, still sceptical.

"Terrible!" Charlie purred with laughter, rocking back and forth on my desk. Then he stopped. Looked me in the eye with his strange slit pupils, fat as an autumn moon now.

"Policing wasn't always about smells, Dutch. Sure, they used the doggies to trace missing persons and criminals on the run. They had their bomb spaniels and bloodhounds. But cases were solved by observation, deduction and legwork. They weren't just walking noses. They were coppers."

"How do you examine evidence properly without smelling it? How could I tell if someone was lying?" I was interested, in spite of myself.

"How can humans tell if someone's lying? By observing their behaviour and cross-checking what they've said with other people. You dogs and your I am the Nose stuff!" He shook his head. "You've got a good brain, Dutch. I know you talked to Jazz about the Peabody enquiry. She thinks that because there are no smells left the case is cold, but she's wrong. Prove it! Show your team how things used to be done and can be again. Put your brain in charge of their noses. They need you."

I knew why he was showing me this and I tried not to get hooked. It was cruel of him to give me hope, and a low, catlike trick to appeal to my sense of duty. I sat on my tail to stop it quivering.

“Thanks for the history lesson,” I said. But I held on to the book and the photo.

“Promise me you’ll look through that manual, at least,” Charlie said. He touched my shoulder lightly, dropped to the floor and swayed out.

I stared at the blue cover for a long time before turning over the first page. Whose book was this? How many police humans carried it around with them? What scents was it keeping from me?

Then I began to read.

I didn’t look up until I’d finished. After closing the book, I slipped the cuffs and Taser back into my belt.

Jazz has just barked “Dutch, can I see you for a minute, please?”, trying to sound severe, and I heard a giggle from Creepy. They’re all out there, with the card and the cake. I don’t need to smell it - I deduce it. Time to march in and act surprised, to relish the crisp snow crunch of the icing and the way it melts on my tongue. Then I’ll announce that it’s not a retirement party after all, and that my arse won’t be behind a desk all day either. They’ll like that.

My name is Dutch, and I’m going to be the best damn copper on the force.