

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Misfit

By Sue Ellis

Copyright © 2014 Sue Ellis. All rights reserved.

I react, and not in a good way, to the smell of wet paint, gas fumes, and Walmart, and that's just a sampling. Their smells provoke asthma, migraine, and neurological anomalies that I mistook for stroke symptoms in the beginning. My eyes sting first, an early warning signal that I've learned to heed, because very soon the domino effect of all the other symptoms follow. So taken altogether, it's nothing to sneeze it—well actually, it's that, too. And just to be clear, I also react to toxins I can't smell, formaldehyde being an example.

The onset of my chemical sensitivity was sudden. I had been mostly free of allergies and sensitivities for all of my fifty-five years. I used to brag that I could influence the flight path of small birds by inhaling deeply through my nostrils. My doctor explained that humans are born with a 'bucket capacity' to process toxins. For most, the bucket never runs over, but mine did.

The toxins that cause chemical sensitivity are mostly petroleum based. After World War II, there was a proliferation of products being made from petroleum, and we all bought into the idea that our lives were being made better by the impressive array of products made from vinyl, plastics, and other synthetics. Marketing experts persuaded us, via slick magazine ads and the media, that we and our homes weren't up to par if we didn't prove our cleanliness by emitting a chemically based scent.

Once I learned that my reactions weren't a psychological disorder or a brain tumor, detox became a complicated process of trying to eliminate chemicals from my life. It's expensive to remove them from your home, and impossible to avoid them in public places. It became apparent that I could react to chemically tainted foods, particularly fast food served in a Styrofoam bowl.

Over time (it's been ten years) I've learned to cope. I limit some favorite pastimes, such as using the brightly colored yarns I've been knitting with all my life. It's the dye. Ditto for embroidery floss and some fabrics. At first I couldn't tolerate being in a library, but now I can stay at least long enough to find a book. I find that well-read titles have off-gassed enough to make them tolerable for me, and many new books are printed with a non-toxic ink that doesn't offend. Most newspapers and phone directories are still tabu. I've overcome magazine withdrawal by leaving them on my porch for a few days, flipping pages as I come and go, encouraging the ink to thoroughly dry. I am limited to the stores I can visit, and avoid the cleaning aisle at any supermarket. I cut my own hair with my husband's help so I don't have to visit salons.

Online research and visits with my doctor indicate that chemical sensitivity is becoming more prevalent. Social security now recognizes multiple chemical sensitivity as a legitimate cause for

disability, and the Americans with Disabilities Act works to provide accommodation for us. People who work in print shops, auto-body shops, or farms that use pesticides are some of the population at risk.

I worry for babies moisturized with the standard baby lotion whose scent we equate with a clean, cosseted child. I worry about scented diapers, the paint used in nurseries, and the hair products, deodorant, perfume and aftershave a baby inhales each time he/she is held. There may be an underlying, sad truth in the Jeff Foxworthy one-liner: *Did you know babies are nauseated by the smell of a clean shirt?*

It's hard to let go of the illusion that most of what's for sale in our culture is safe for the general population, or failing that, that the government would immediately react to the incidence of environmental illness with education about toxins, at least those that we innocently bring into our homes.

Still, there has been progress. I have been gratified in recent years to see the grass-roots movement demanding less toxic products. There must have been an impressive hue and cry to set that process in motion.

I can't say for sure what brought on my illness. I worked around ink for most of my twenty-seven year career. Part of that career included a stint at a mail processing facility where the maintenance crew sprayed a mist of rubbing alcohol onto the machinery to clean it. I delivered mail in a rural farming area for several years, daily blackening my hands with newsprint. In the summer, crop dusting planes sprayed pesticides on the wheat fields adjacent to the the roads I traveled.

My husband and I lived in a small farming community for many years. Our house was less than a mile from a farm chemical plant. My husband worked as a farmer, and then as a lawn pesticide applicator. It's hard to figure why I got sick and he didn't. People with auto-immune disorders are more likely to develop environmental illness, or so I've read, so I'd qualify on that count. At this point the reason doesn't matter unless the knowledge can save someone else.

I'd like to have my old life back, but I wouldn't change my personal habits now, even if I got well. I've learned a simpler way, and it suits me. I might have prevented what happened to me if I'd known then what I know now, so I doggedly spread the word to whoever will listen, even though my testimony is often met with skepticism.

There's nothing under my kitchen sink these days except a jug of vinegar, a bottle of environmentally friendly dish soap and similarly responsible dishwasher powder. My husband and I have learned to make old-fashioned bath soap with water, oil and lye--an alchemy so magical that it tames the only harsh ingredient, lye, resulting in a useful, luxurious product. It's what chemistry ought to be about.