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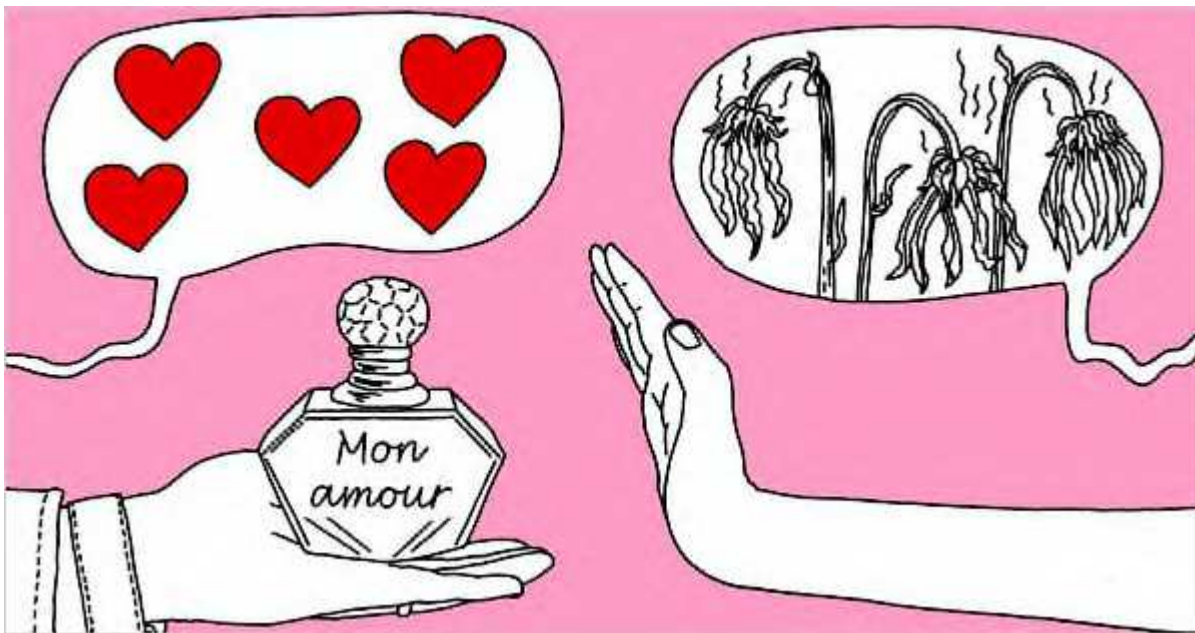
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Peter Arkle

By NATASHA SINGER  
Published: February 14, 2008

PERFUME has long been an aphrodisiac decanted sparingly from an iconic glass bottle. But for Leslie Ware, a fashion editor at a quarterly magazine in Huntsville, Ala., fragrance has worked its magic in the opposite direction, as a romantic deal breaker.

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[Enlarge This Image](#) Several years ago, Ms. Ware was engaged to a gentleman who did not like Trish McEvoy 9, the fruity vanilla blend she had been wearing for seven years.

“He thought I smelled like a traveling carnival, the kind where they sell corn dogs, because I guess the smell was reminiscent of cotton candy,” Ms. Ware, 28, said. “This was the demise of Trish No. 9.”



Robert Wright for The New York Times

**SNIFF, SNIFF** The fragrance display at Barneys New York.

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Robert Wright for The New York Times

Sephora's fragrance display is well stocked.

It was a bad omen.

Soon after, Ms. Ware said she broke up with the perfume-averse boyfriend. She has not worn fragrance since.

A more recent boyfriend fared no better after he bought Ms. Ware what she called “an old-lady perfume” against her wishes.

“It made me mad,” she said. “I told him not to bother buying me fragrance since I am picky, and now I have a \$125 bottle of perfume sitting in a closet.”

Like red roses and heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, perfume has traditionally been one of the fail-safe offerings of Valentine’s Day. But this year, as couples sit down to romantic dinners, a small but growing cohort of American women will emit scents that are more corporal and less Chanel. At a time when the number of perfumes on shelves has dramatically increased, consumption of fragrances is declining, industry analysts said. Last year, department stores carried 1,160 different fragrances for women compared with 756 in 2002, according to NPD Group, a market research firm that tracks consumer product sales.

Yet, last year in the United States, spending on upscale women’s fragrances declined, as part of a multiyear trend. The group said \$1.97 billion was spent, down from \$2 billion in 2002.

Like Ms. Ware, more women are forgoing scent altogether. Last year, about 15 percent of women said they did not wear fragrance, up from 13 percent in 2003, according to a survey of 9,800 women conducted by NPD.

“That may sound like a small number, but nationally that translates into two million more women who are saying ‘I don’t wear fragrance,’” said Karen Grant, the senior beauty industry analyst at NPD. “Eighty-five percent of women are still buying fragrance, but an increasing number tell us they are wearing fewer scents, less frequently or not at all.”

Fragrance fatigue is probably inevitable, with heavily fruited scents wafting out of



Robert Wright for The New York Times  
**SPRITZ, ANYONE?** At Macy's, top, and Saks demonstrators roam the aisles hunting willing wrists.

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Andrew H. Walker/Getty Images  
Lapo Elkann, right, spritzes Simon Doonan, Barneys' creative director, with Outrageous by Frédéric Malle.

everything from dishwashing liquids to hotel linens to candle displays at the mall. But perfume aversion seems to be tapping into a larger societal phenomenon that may have its origins in bans on cellphones and cigarettes: the idea that the collective demands of the public space trump one's personal space.

“People are shying away from fragrances not for the traditional reasons that you'd expect, that it is too expensive or that they are wearing alternative products like body sprays or lotions,” Ms. Grant said. “Many people said it bothers them that fragrance has an effect on other people, that they are trying to be considerate by not overcoming others with scent.”

Indeed, Rochelle R. Bloom, the president of the Fragrance Foundation, an industry trade group, said that people who worry that their fragrance may offend others simply may be wearing perfume improperly.

“Your fragrance should never be perceived beyond an arm's length, it should not precede you into the room,” Ms. Bloom said.

She suggested that people wear ancillary scent products, like body lotion and bath gel, during the day and save perfume for the evenings and weekends. “The art of wearing fragrance involves not having it interfere with your neighbor.”

People may be noticing and shying away from perfume more at the moment because of a current vogue for potent scents, said Tania Sanchez, an author of “Perfumes: The Guide” (Viking), which is to come out in April. Other industry observers point to the changing nature of romance — less intimacy combined with the greater license to comment on a partner's personal habits — as, pardon the pun, a disincentive.

“Something in the fabric of relationships is contributing to women, or the men who would have given them fragrance, buying less,” said Leigh Anne Rowinski, a director of client solutions at Information Resources Inc., a market research firm that tracks sales of mass

consumer products.

Americans spent about \$340 million last year on women's fragrances at chains of big box, food and drug stores, down from about \$346 million in 2004, according to Information Resources.

"As people's lives have gotten busier, their relationships are less intimate, and you have to know someone pretty well to walk into a store and explain what kind of fragrance they might like or not like," Ms. Rowinski said.

Several women interviewed for this article said their mates had complained on occasion about strong scents that leave a trail in their wake. Daryl Rubin, 21, an account coordinator at a beauty marketing firm in Manhattan, recalled how a college boyfriend begged her to stop wearing her favorite perfume, Angel by Thierry Mugler, which emits a scent not unlike chocolate fondue.

"One day it was just too much for him," Ms. Rubin said.

Although the relationship ended, she has not risked wearing Angel again because she is worried other people might not be as forthcoming with their distaste as her old boyfriend. "A man is in your personal space, so perfume is like a collective decision for the both of you," she said.

The idea that some people's perfumes are other people's fumes is not new.

In 1738, Alexander Pope wrote in a disparaging verse about over-fragranced nobles: "And all your courtly civet-cats can vent, Perfume to you, to me is excrement."

Now a few workplaces and cultural sites are trying to become fragrance-free zones. Some doctors' offices ask patients not to wear perfume because some medical personnel or patients may have allergies or asthma that could be exacerbated by scent. Some schools ask students to forgo perfume and even scented deodorants if a teacher has a fragrance allergy — much like peanut butter has been removed from some cafeterias.

Halifax, Nova Scotia has instituted a "no-scent awareness policy," which encourages its employees to wear fragrance-free cosmetics. Some arts groups, like the Madison Symphony Orchestra in Wisconsin and the Orlando Opera Company in Florida, ask patrons to curb the cologne.

Wendy Roberts, a mystery writer, said she attends many literary conferences, some of

which are designated as fragrance-free. Other conferences, she finds, are mightily perfumed.

“If I am wearing my strawberry lotion and the person next to me is wearing her apricot soap, then together we smell like a fruit salad gone wrong,” Ms. Roberts said. “If it is a romance conference, my God, you are ready to keel over when you are trapped in an elevator with those smells.”

Indeed, the pervasiveness of such ambient smell may be putting some consumers off scent.

Ms. Roberts said she recently recommended that a fragrance-fatigued friend rip the scent strips out of magazines and throw them in the trash before she carried the periodicals into the house.

The sheer abundance of fragrances on the market these days also may paralyze consumers, said Ms. Sanchez, the author.

“The exhaustion of wading through a tremendous number of fragrances which all smell alike has just turned people off,” Ms. Sanchez said. “If the perfume in the \$80 bottle smells like the thing you have in the shower you wash your hair with that you bought for five bucks, then I can imagine you want to hold off until you have the right scent.”

But sometimes couples can reach olfactory accord. Last fall, Robert Flood, a retired technology platform tester in Allen, Tex., worried how to tell his wife of 25 years, Amy, that he could not abide her new perfume, [Elizabeth Taylor](#)’s Passion.

“It was very atrocious, at least to me,” Mr. Flood, 52, said in a phone interview last week.

The couple later worked out a compromise so that he would not be discomfited should her scent again stray into his air space. Henceforth, each will choose a fragrance for the other to wear.

“On Valentine’s Day, we will go to one of her favorite stores and she will buy me English Leather and I will buy her Jean Naté, which is the fragrance she was wearing when we had just met and she was 17 going on 18,” Mr. Flood said. “We are not smelling the perfume so much as the memories.”

Indeed, for the Floods, fragrance brings with it the Proustian power of recall. One could argue that those who forgo perfume now may inadvertently diminish at some future date

the textural memories of relationships past.

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