

## SPICE OF LIFE + BY CHITRA DIVAKARUNI



## common scents

THE SMELL OF  
CHILDHOOD NEVER FADES



## ALSO TODAY:

**Table Talk**

Has becoming a parent changed your political views?

> Chitra Divakaruni  
Common scents

**Wild Things**

Road games to keep restless travelers happy



## YESTERDAY:

**Toy story**

How does a cynical woman end up weeping over a 7-inch tiger?

**Mamafesto**

Why it's time for Mothers Who Think

it's a cool December morning halfway across the world in Gurap, a little village outside Calcutta where we've come to visit my mother. I sit on the veranda and watch my little boys, Anand and Abhay, as they play on the dirt road. They have a new cricket bat and ball, a gift from their grandma, but soon they abandon these to feed mango leaves to the neighbor's goat, which has wandered over. Abhay, who is 2, wants to climb onto the goat's back. Anand, who is 5 and very much the big brother, tells him it's not a good idea, but Abhay doesn't listen.

Behind me the door opens. Even before I hear the flap-flap of her leather chappals, I know who it is. My mother, fresh from her bath, heralded by the scent of the sandalwood soap she has been using ever since I can remember. Its clean, familiar smell pulls me back effortlessly into my childhood.

When I was young, my mother and I had a ritual every evening. She would comb my hair, rub in hibiscus oil and braid it into thick double plaits. It took a long time -- there were a lot of knots to work through. But I was rarely impatient. I loved the sleepy fragrance of the oil (the same oil she used, which she sometimes let me rub into her hair). I loved, too, the rhythm of her hands, and the stories (each with its not-so-subtle moral) that she told me as she combed. The tale of Sukhu and Dukhu, the two sisters. The kind one gets the prince, the greedy one is eaten up by a serpent. Or the tale of the little cowherd boy who outwits the evil witch. Size and strength, after all, are no match for intelligence.

What is it about smells that lingers in our

subconscious, comforting and giving joy, making real what would otherwise be wooden and wordy? I'm not sure. But I do know this: Every lesson that I remember from my childhood, from my mother, has a smell at its center.

The smell of turmeric, which she made into a paste with milk and rubbed into my skin to take away blemishes, reminds me to take pride in my appearance, to make the best of what nature has given me.

The smell of the rosewater-scented rice pudding she always made for New Year is the smell of hope. It reminds me to never give up. Who knows -- something marvelous may be waiting just around the bend.

Even the smell of the iodine she dabbed on my scraped knees and elbows, which I so hated then, is one I now recall with wry gratitude. Its stinging, bitter-brown odor is that of love, love that sometimes hurts while it's doing its job.

Let me not mislead you. I wasn't always so positively inclined toward my mother's lessons -- or the smells that accompanied them. When I first moved to the United States, I wanted to change myself, completely. I washed every last drop of hibiscus oil from my hair with Vidal Sassoon shampoo. I traded in my saris for Levi's and tank tops. I danced the night away in discos and returned home in the bleary-eyed morning smelling of vodka and sweat and cigarettes, the perfume of young America.

But when Anand was born, something changed. They say you begin to understand your mother only when you become a mother yourself. Only then do you appreciate all the little things about her that you took for granted. Maybe that's true. Otherwise, that morning in the hospital, looking down at Anand's fuzzy head, why did I ask my husband to make a trip to the Indian store and bring me back a bar of sandalwood soap?

I have my own rituals now, with my boys, my own special smells that are quite different. (I learned early that we can't be our mothers. Most times, it's better to not even try.)

On weekends I make a big chicken curry with turmeric and cloves. Anand helps me cut up the tomatoes into uneven wedges; Abhay finger-shreds the cilantro with great glee. As the smell of spices fills the house, we sing. Sometimes it's a song from India:

*Ay, ay, Chanda mama* -- Come to me, Uncle Moon.  
Sometimes it's "Old MacDonald Had a Farm."

When the children are sick, I sprinkle lavender water on a handkerchief and lay it on their foreheads to fend off that other smell, hot and metallic: the smell of fever and fear.

If I have a special event coming up, I open the suitcase my mother gave me at my wedding and let them pick out an outfit for me, maybe a gold-embroidered kurta or a silk shawl. The suitcase smells of rose potpourri. The boys burrow into it and take deep, noisy breaths.

Am I creating memories for them? Things that will comfort them in the dark, sour moments that must come to us all at some time? Who knows -- there is so much out of my own childhood that I've forgotten that I can only hope so.

"Watch out!" says my mother now, but it's too late. The goat, having eaten enough mango leaves, has decided to move on. He gives a great shrug, and Abhay comes tumbling off his back. He lies on the dirt for a moment, his mouth a perfect O of surprise, then runs crying to me. A twinge goes through me even as I hide my smile. A new lesson, this, since motherhood: how you can feel someone else's pain so sharply, like needles, in your own bones.

When I pick him up, Abhay buries his face in my neck and stays there a long time, even after the tears have stopped. Is he taking in the smell of my body? Is he going to remember the fragrance of the jabakusum oil that I asked my mother to rub into my hair last night, for old time's sake? I'm not sure. But I do know this -- I've just gained something new, something to add to my scent-shop of memories: the dusty, hot smell of his hair, his hands pungent with the odor of freshly-torn mango leaves.

June 26, 1997

Discuss Chitra Divakaruni's new column in [Table Talk](#).

[ABOUT CHITRA](#) + [SALON COLUMNISTS](#)

[MOTHERS WHO THINK](#) |

[SALON](#) |

[NEWSLETTER](#) |

[CONTACT US](#) |

[ARCHIVES](#) |

[TABLE TALK](#)