



Autoethnographic Literary Nonfiction: Eulogy For a Perfume

Description

Sometimes you spot them, like people you once knew or loved, the ghosts of perfumes past. Someone walks by you on a city street and there it is. You want to chase after them, but what do you say? *Let me walk with you*, or better yet, *let me walk a few steps behind you*.

AUTHOR'S MEMO

“Eulogy For a Perfume” started writing itself the day I got the news. I was raised in the Reformed Jewish tradition, which includes seven days of shiva. For hours we eat and share stories. We look at pictures. We laugh. Shiva is an acknowledgment of sorrow, but also a celebration of life, if not an actual extension of it, through memory.

[As a sommelier and wine educator](#), I developed a manifesto to guide my approach to teaching and communicating wine tasting. I had to convince myself first that what I had to offer was more than just vocabulary to help people feel more at ease in refined situations. Where was the value in it? The process of wine tasting engages all of the senses. When done in company it inspires curiosity and conversation. Talking about smells doesn't come easily. In order to recognize and communicate smells, we inevitably resort to memory. To identify notes of black cherry, you must have an olfactory memory in place. Years ago, I took a deeper dive into neurobiology, specifically the olfactory sense, and how our limbic system identifies aromatic compounds and associates them with emotion. Over the course of our lives, we grow an olfactory database formed through memory and emotional association. This is why specific scents have the power to suddenly evoke such vivid memories. And memory is the closest thing to living twice.

When a perfume dies, it is a sort of death. When a scent disappears forever, so do all of the memories it once inspired. I consider this essay a shiva. An attempt to extend and celebrate a perfume that many

of us are currently mourning.

Eulogy For a Perfume

When a beauty product disappears forever, they call it *discontinued*. It's an industry term, intended to soften the blow and keep your business when your favorite shade of lipstick or eye shadow, face cream, or fill-in-the-blank cosmetic suddenly stops existing. The more determined among us will scavenge the internet for the last remaining bottles or even reach out directly to the manufacturer and plead our case for anything left over in the warehouse. Defeated, we typically move on after a brief period of mourning. We tell ourselves it's a chance to try something new, and what is life if not a series of discoveries and reinvention?

When a perfume dies, it's different.

Sometimes you spot them, like people you once knew or loved, the ghosts of perfumes past. Someone walks by you on a city street and there it is. You want to chase after them, but what do you say? *Let me walk with you*, or better yet, *let me walk a few steps behind you*.

Not everyone will experience the loss of a favorite scent. Others of us will lose several in a lifetime. They are the casualties of an offshore war, where battles are waged inside shareholder meetings and chemical regulatory boardrooms, where men and women in sterile jackets decide the fate of a fragrance. To them, it is nothing more than a notation on the morning's agenda. To us, these same people are gods atop Mount Olympus, puppeteers of human destiny. They alone hold the power to erase whole chapters of our lives in one stroke.

Life is made of memories. We have a finite number of moments on this earth and we can only use them once. It is the remembering, the retelling, and the relishing of these moments that stretches the inconceivable notion of time so that we may live and relive our lives over and over again.

I lost my dad when I was 22. I miss his voice the most. I can see his face in pictures, and I remember certain facts. But it's his voice, raised against the slosh of water in the neighbor's pool and telling me to keep my legs straight when I kick, that's gone. I remember him in the basement perched in the center of the couch with a conductor's stick urging me to listen to the swell of the brass section of a symphony, that way it grows from nothing into something powerful. I remember the words, but I cannot hear them. That missing piece makes the memories seem somewhat faded, like photos taken in the 1970s.

When I smell that familiar accord: a suggestion of overripe citrus (lime maybe), ammonia, and eucalyptus I can hear my dad's laughter, and even my own, 38 years younger and an octave higher. I cannot make out entire phrases, but I can hear him.

Sometimes it does come back. His words are vague, yet vivid like a dream. I noticed it for the first time while unwrapping a bar of Ivory soap. It's all he ever used, even on his hair. Another time I found a can of Colgate shaving foam in a friend's medicine cabinet and squirted a dollop into my palm. My father

used the shaving soap, a brush and bowl. He would lather up and scrape the blade across the tough hairs of his beard (I can hear that), and when he nicked himself, he would smile and keep going, and spend the rest of the morning with a corner of toilet paper stuck to his face. I would sit on the bathroom counter and watch. Sometimes I would smear soap on my own face and use the back of a comb to shave it away.

When I smell that familiar accord: a suggestion of overripe citrus (lime maybe), ammonia, and eucalyptus I can hear my dad's laughter, and even my own, 38 years younger and an octave higher. I cannot make out entire phrases, but I can hear him. It's enough to make me buy a whole stack of Ivory soap bars. I know this because I did it.

That is the power of scent. Invisible molecules that travel up into the far reaches of the limbic system of the brain, where the tiny, almond-shaped amygdala attaches emotional significance to events and objects. This is where smells are interpreted, a thousand times a day. It is why our hearts race when we smell something burning, or why we feel a wave of anticipation at the first waft of movie theatre popcorn. If you can't quite remember flying in the eighties, brew a pot of instant coffee and light a cigarette.

When a favorite perfume ceases to exist, it is another kind of death. Having been created, it leaves a special sort of emptiness. Nothing short of divine intervention can bring that molecular mélange back again, and all the life associated with it.

You can try and recreate it from what you remember, but it's never the same. Scent memory requires the scent itself.

I recently learned of the passing of one fragrance in particular. Sienne l'Hiver, from the niche perfume house Eau d'Italie. It was the co-creator herself, Marina, who broke the news to me over coffee. "We tried so hard to save it," she said, but stringent rules regarding the potency of aromatic extracts would mean something akin to a triple amputation. Her partner Sebastian added, "It would never be the same. Not even close."

Our paths crisscrossed in so many ways that you could almost call it destiny. Although it was a series of human relationships and unbelievable coincidences that brought us together in Brooklyn one day, it was Sienne l'Hiver that made us want to keep talking.

And so, they let it go. Said their goodbyes and pulled the plug. We paused. A silent prayer in memoriam and then changed the subject.

As we do when people die, someone takes on the task of sharing the news in slow soft words over the phone, or delicately by email so that the family members may grieve their loss without the added burden of having to comfort others.

I began a list of who to tell and how. My friend Laura came first. Once upon a time she was only a friend of a friend. Then a friend of another friend on the other side of the ocean. Our paths crisscrossed in so many ways that you could almost call it destiny. Although it was a series of human relationships

and unbelievable coincidences that brought us together in Brooklyn one day, it was Sienne l'Hiver that made us want to keep talking.

I was crashing on her couch one summer while visiting New York City. One night before bed she told me about this *this weird perfume* she had gotten at the office. At the time, she had worked at a fashion magazine and the beauty editors passed on all of their samples to the staff. "It's like nothing I've ever smelled before," she said, and extended the bottle to spray my wrist, "Try it and tell me what you think." I rubbed my wrists together and behind my neck as always, and went to sleep.

The next morning, I awoke to a blazing sun. The scent of my hair shocked me. The perfume had awakened while I slept. I smelled something like black olive and bell pepper, traces of smoke, but not the cigarette we'd shared on the front stoop. It was cool ash from a spent hearth. There was a warm and savory quality to the scent that felt less like a perfume and more like place. We unraveled each layer of it over breakfast. We tried to put words to these sensations. That day we discovered our shared joy of perfume, the untangling of aromatic threads and the twisting of language to describe them.

Laura left for the office and I went to the internet, determined to learn more about who was behind the perfume, what was it was supposed to smell like, and why.

Despite the French name, it turned out that the whole line of fragrances was Italian, each one inspired by a specific place and or historical period in Italy. At the time, I was working for an English-language magazine in Rome, and so I sent them a request for a press kit and a few article ideas. It turned out that while the company was officially based out of Positano, they had an office in Rome. To my gleeful surprise they invited me to meet for coffee.

Sienne L'Hiver led to that first meeting with Marina and Sebastian in Rome, and their believing in me and my writing, enough to entrust me with their brand story. A few years later, we crafted a video together to tell that story, the first I ever wrote and produced for someone else. They bolstered my confidence in a life-changing way when I was approaching 30-years-old and fighting a daily impulse to leave writing behind for something more practical.

That is when I learned that Sienne l'Hiver, was supposed to capture the Tuscan town of Siena in wintertime. I had studied there one summer, and had one leftover love story that faded slowly into fall. I would come up for weekends until it ended. I remember the first cool nights and the way the stone walls of the city would take their time warming up in the morning. Up in the hills surrounding the city, winter nights came sooner. I remember the scent of hearth smoke that descended just as the fog was rising.

To my memories they added their own, along with a slice of culture that included a striking if somewhat morbid tidbit about the seasonal pig slaughter and salami production that always took place in winter, hence the mineral note of the perfume, an olfactory homage to blood.

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And then there is Monty. No one wears Sienne l'hiver like he does. It rounds the corner and announces his arrival in a way nothing else can. Monty wasn't always my friend. At first, he was only the apparition of an enemy, the jealous boyfriend of my college classmate, whose mere existence forced us to end our Wednesday night playdates early. We had only met a few times back then. The only time I remember was graduation, and pretending to like him. He still remembers my yellow dress.

I didn't see him again for seven years, I only heard about him. Monty was moving up at the travel agency where he worked in Chicago. He was becoming someone important. But, when my friend was accepted to New York University for theatre writing, a dream he swore would never come true, Monty moved with him.

We got lost over and over again. Venice seems designed for it. But oh the pleasures you find along the way! At the end of one winding back street we stopped into a perfume shop where I introduced them to Eau d'Italie. I told them the story about Sienne l'Hiver and sprayed them both in samples. Maybe it was all the wine, but Monty bought two bottles right there.

Sometimes it takes disliking a person to later love them. Forgiveness forges intimacy. When invisible walls fall down, we are more able to perceive that subtle shift in sentiment, to feel our feelings forming.

I met up with both of them in Venice. Monty had come for a work trip with my friend, now his fiancé, in tow. I took the train up from Rome for the occasion. Together we wandered from one bar to the next, stopping to drink tiny glasses of strong white wine. In Venetian dialect they call them *ombre*, little shadows. Enough of them will leave you in the dark.

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We tottered onto a gondola and ferried to the train station to change my ticket home so that we could be together one more night. I slept on the floor of their hotel room and the next morning when we said goodbye, we also said "I love you."

We'll always have Venice. We'll have the photographs we printed, and the lyrics we forgot while singing along in piano bars. There are the memories of some bad mussels we would just as soon forget. But for Monty and me, it was the moment we fell in love, and it smelled of Sienne l'Hiver.





Read more from our special feature, [Fragrance Cultures](#).

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