Lavender: Part I
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ANDRÉ ACIMAN

Lavender

Part I

Life begins somewhere with the scent of lavender. My father is standing in front of a mirror. He has just showered and shaved and is about to put on a suit. I watch him tighten the knot of his necktie, flip down his shirt collar, and button it up. Suddenly, there it is, as always: lavender.

I know where it comes from. An elaborately shaped bottle sits on the dresser. One day, when I’m having a very bad migraine and am lying on the living room sofa, my mother, scrambling for something to take my mind off the pain, picks up the bottle, unscrews the cap, and dabs some of its contents onto a handkerchief, which she then brings to my nose. Instantly, I feel better. She lets me keep the handkerchief. I like to hold it in my fist, with my head tilted slightly back, as if I’d been punched in a fist fight and were still bleeding—or the way I’d seen others do when they were feeling sick or crushed and walked about the house taking occasional sniffs through crumpled handkerchiefs in what looked like last-ditch efforts to avoid a fainting spell. I liked the handkerchief, liked the secret scent emanating from within its folds, liked smuggling it to school and taking furtive whiffs in class, because the scent brought me back to my parents, to their living room, and into a world that was so serene that just inhaling its scent cast a protective cloud around me. Smell lavender and I was sheltered, happy, and beloved. Smell lavender and in came good thoughts—about life, about those I loved, about me. Smell lavender, and, no matter how far from each other, we were all gathered in one warm, snug room stuffed with pillows, close to a crackling fire, with the patter of rain outside to remind us our lives were secure. Smell lavender and you couldn’t pull us apart.

My father’s old cologne can be found the world over. I have only to walk into a large department store and there it is. Half a century later it looks exactly the same. I could, if I were prescient enough and did not want to risk walking into a store one day and not finding it, purchase a tiny bottle and keep it somewhere, as a stand-in for my father, for my love of lavender, or for that tall evening when, as an adolescent, I’d gone with my mother to buy my first aftershave lotion, but couldn’t make up my mind and returned alone the next evening after school, happy to discover, among so many other things, that a man could use shaving as an excuse for wearing perfume.
I was baffled to find there were so many scents in the world, and even more baffled to find my father's scent among them. I asked the salesman to let me sample my father's brand, mispronouncing its name on purpose, overdoing my surprise as I examined its slanted shape as though it were a stranger whom I had hailed in error, knowing that the bottle and I were on intimate terms at home, that if it knew every twist my worst migraines took—as I knew every curve on its body—it knew of my imaginary flights from school in Mother's handkerchief, knew more about my fantasies than I dared know myself. And yet, in the shop that was about to close that day and whose owner was growing ever more impatient with my inability to choose, I felt mesmerized by something new, something at once dangerous and enticing, as though these numberless bottles, neatly arranged in stacks around the store, held the promise of nights out in large cities where everything from the buildings, lights, faces, foods, places, and the bridges I'd end up crossing made the world ever more desirable, if only because I too, by virtue of this or that potion, had become desirable—to others, to myself.

I spent an hour testing bottles. In the end I bought a lavender cologne, but not my father's. After paying and having the package gift-wrapped, I felt like I'd been handed a birth certificate or a new passport. This would be me—or me as long as the bottle lasted. Then we'd have to look into the matter again.

Over time, I discovered all kinds of lavenders. There were light, ethereal lavenders; some were mild and timid, others lush and overbearing, some tart, as if picked from the field and left to parch in large vats of vinegar; others were overwhelmingly sweet. Some lavenders ended up smelling like an herb garden; others, with hints of so many spices, were blended beyond recognition.

I experimented with each one, purchased many bottles, not just because I wanted to collect them all or was searching for the ideal lavender—the hidden lavender, the ur-lavender that superseded all other lavenders—but because I was either eager to prove or disprove something I suspected all along: that the lavender I wanted was none other than the one I'd grown up with and would ultimately turn back to once I'd established that all the others were wrong for me. Perhaps the lavender I wanted was basic lavender. Ordinary lavender. Papa's lavender. You go out into the world to acquire all manner of habits and learn all sorts of languages, but the one tongue you neglect most is the one you've spoken at home, just as the customs you feel most comfortable with are those you never knew were.
customs until you saw others practice completely different ones and realized you didn't quite mind your own, though you'd strayed so far now that you probably no longer knew how to practice them. I collected every fragrance in the world. But my scent—what was my scent? Had I ever had a scent? Was there going to be one scent only, or would I want all of them?

What I found after purchasing several aftershave lotions was that they would all lose their luster, like certain elements in the actinide series that have a brief radioactive life before turning into lead. Some smelled too strong, or too weak, or too much of such and such and not enough of this or that. Some failed to bring out something essential about me; others suggested things that weren't in me at all. Perhaps finding fault with each fragrance was also my way of finding fault with myself, not just for choosing the wrong fragrance each time, or for even thinking I needed a fragrance in the first place, but for believing that the blessings conferred by cologne could ever bring about the new life I yearned for.

And yet, even as I criticized each fragrance, I found myself growing attached to it, as though something that had less to do with the fragrances themselves than with that part of me that had sought them out and been seduced by them and finally blossomed because of them should never be allowed to perish. Sometimes the history of provisional attachments means more to us than the attachments themselves, the way the history of a love affair stirs more love than the affair itself. Sometimes it is in blind ritual and not faith that we encounter the sacred, the way it is habit not character that makes us who we are. Sometimes the clothes and scents we wear have more of us in them than we do ourselves.

The search for ideal lavender was like the search for that part of me that needed nothing more than a fragrance to emerge from the sleep of thousands. I searched for it the way I searched for my personal color, or for a brand of cigarettes, or for my favorite composer. Finding the right lavender would finally allow me to say, "Yes, this is me. Where was I all this time?" Yet, no sooner is the scent purchased, than the me who was supposed to emerge—like the us who is about to emerge when we buy new clothes, or sign up for a magazine that seems so thoroughly right for us, or purchase a membership to a health club, or move to a new city, or discover a new faith and practice new rituals with new congregants among whom we make new friends—this me turns out to be, of course, the one we'd always wished to mask or drive away. What did I expect? Different scent, same person.

Over the past thirty-five years I have tried almost all the colognes and aftershave lotions that perfume manufacturers have concocted. Not just
lavenders, but pine, chamomile, tea, citrus, honeysuckle, fern, rosemary, and smoky variations of the most rarefied leathers and spices. I liked nothing more than to clutter my medicine cabinet and the entire rim of my bathtub with bottles two and three deep, each vial like a tiny, unhatched effigy of someone I was, or wished to be, and, for a while, thought I'd finally become. Scent A: purchased in such and such a year, hoping to encounter happiness. Scent B: purchased while scent A was almost finished; it helped me abandon A. C, marking sudden fatigue with B. D was a gift. Never liked it; wore it to make the giver happy, stopped using it as soon as she was gone. Comes E, which I loved so much that I eventually purchased F, along with nine of its sibling scents made by the same house. Yet F managed to make me tire of E and its isotopes. Sought out G. Disliked it as soon as I realized that someone I hated loved it. Then H. How I loved H! Stayed with H for years. They don't make it any longer, should have stocked up on it. But then, much as I loved it, I had stopped using it long before its manufacturer discontinued it, Back to E, which I had always liked. Yes, definitely E. Until I realized there had always been something slightly off, something missing about E. I stopped using it again. Of the woman who breezed through my life and, in the ten days I knew her, altered me forever, all I remember is her gift. I continued to wear the fragrance she'd given me as a way of thinking she'd be back soon enough. Now, twenty years later, all that's left of her is a bottle that reminds me less of her than of the lover I once was.

I have thrown many things away in life. But aftershave bottles, never. I take these bottles wherever I move, the way the ancients traveled with their ancestral masks. Each bottle contains a part of me, the formaldehyde'd me, the genie of myself. One could, as in an Arabian tale, rub each bottle and summon up an older me. Some, despite the years, are still alive, though not a thing they own or wear is any longer in my possession; others have even died or grown so dull I want nothing more to do with them; I've forgotten their phone number, their favorite song, their furtive wishes. I take up an old scent and, suddenly, I remember why this scent always reminds me of the most ardent days of my life—ardent not because they were happy times, but because I had spent so much time thirsting for happiness that, in retrospect, some of that imagined happiness must have rubbed off and scented an entire winter, casting a happy film over days I've always known I'd never wish to relive. And as I hold this bottle, which seems more precious than so many things, I begin to think that one day someone I love—particularly someone I love—will happen along and open it and wonder what this scent could possibly have meant to me. What was it I'd wished to keep alive all these years? This is the scent of early spring when they called to say things had gone my way. This of an evening with my mother, when she came to meet me downtown and I thought how old she
looks—now I realize she was younger by ten years than I am today. This the night of the A-minor. "And this?" they’ll want to ask. "How about this one?"

Fragrances linger for decades, and our loved ones may remember us by them, but the legend in each vial clams up the moment we’re gone. Our genie speaks to no one. He simply watches as those he’s loved open and investigate. He’s dying to tell: “This was the day I discovered pleasure. And this—how couldn’t any of you know?—this was the night we met, standing outside Carnegie Hall after a concert, and how simply one thing led to another, and afterwards, when it rained, we had waited a while under the cantilever, both reluctant to leave, having found a pretext in rain, strangers starting to talk, making a quick dash into a nearby coffee shop—deplorable coffee, damp shoes, wet hair, surly foreign waiter mumbling Unspeakanese when we tipped him kindly—and sat and spoke of Mahler and The Four Quartets, and no one would have guessed, not even us, we’d end up together in a studio on the Upper West Side.” But the voice cannot be heard. To die is to forget you ever lived. To die is to forget you loved, or suffered, or got and lost things you wanted. Tomorrow, you say to yourself, I won’t remember anything, won’t remember this face, this knee, this old scar, or the hand that wrote all this.

The bottles are stand-ins for me. I keep them the way the ancient Egyptians kept all of their household belongings for that day when they’d need them in their afterlife. To part with them now is to die before my time. And yet, there are times when I think there should have been many, many other bottles there—not just bottles I lost or forgot about, but bottles I never owned, bottles I don’t even know exist and, but for a tiny accident, might have given an entirely different scent to my life. There is a street I pass by every day, never once suspecting that in years to come it will lead to an apartment I still don’t know will be mine one day. How can I not know this—isn’t there a science?

Conversely, there are places I bid farewell to long before knowing I must leave, places and people whose disappearance I rehearse not just to learn how to live without them when the time comes but to put off their loss by foreseeing it a bit at a time beforehand. I live in the dark so as not to be blinded when darkness comes. I do the same with life, making it more conditional and provisional than it already is so as to forget that one day . . . one day my birthday will come around and I won’t be there to celebrate it.

It is still unthinkable that those who caused us the greatest pain and turned us inside out could at some point in time have been totally unknown, unborn to us. We might have crossed them in numberless places, given them street directions, opened a door for them, stood up to let them take their seat in a crowded concert hall, and never once recognized the person who would ruin us for everyone else. I’d be willing to shave years
from the end of my life to go back and intercept that evening under a
cantilever when we both put our coats over our heads and rushed through
the rain after coffee and I said, almost without thinking, I didn't want to say
goodnight yet, although it was already dawn. I would give years, not to
unwrite this evening or to rewrite it, but to put it on hold and, as happens
when we bracket off time, be able to wonder indefinitely who I'd be had
things taken another turn. Time, as always, is given in the wrong tense.

The walls of the farmacutica of Santa Maria Novella in Florence are lined
with rows of tiny drawers, each of which contains a different perfume. Here
I could create my own scent museum, my own laboratory, my imaginary
Grasse, the perfume capital of France, with all of its quaint ateliers and
narrow lanes and winding passageways linking one establishment to the
next. My scent museum would even boast its own periodic table, listing all
the perfumes in my life, beginning, of course, with the first, the simplest, the
lightest—lavender, the hydrogen of all fragrances—followed by the sec-
tond, the third, the fourth, each standing next to the other like milestones
in my life, as though there were indeed a method to the passage of time. In the
place of helium (He, atomic number 2) I'd have Hermès, and in the place of
lithium (Li, 3) Liberty; Bernini would replace beryllium (Be, 4), Borsari
boron (B, 5), Carven carbon (C, 6), Night nitrogen (N, 7), Oynx oxygen (O,
8), and Floris fluorine (F, 9). And before I know it my entire life could be
charted by these elements alone; Arden instead of argon (Ar, 18); Knize
instead of potassium (K, 19); Canoe for calcium (Ca, 20); Guerlain for
germanium (Ge, 32); Yves Saint-Laurent for yttrium (Y, 39); Patou for
platinum, (Pt, 78), and, of course, Old Spice for osmium (Os, 76).

As in Mendeleev's periodic table, one could sort these scents in rows and
categories: by herbs; flowers; fruits; spices; woods. Or by places. By
people. By loves. By the hotels where this or that soap managed to cast an
unforgettable scent over this or that great city. By the films or foods or
clothes or concerts we've loved. By perfumes women wore. Or even by
years, so that I could mark the bottles as my grandmother would when she
labeled each jar of marmalade with her neat octogenarian's cursive, noting
on each the fruit and the year of its make—as though each scent had its own
werkeverzeichnis number. Aria di Parma (1970), Acqua Amara (1975), Ponte
Vecchio (1980).

The aftershaves I used at eighteen and at twenty-four, different fra-
grances, yet located on the same column: a voyage to Italy is what they
shared in common. Me at sixteen and me at thirty-two: twice the age, yet
still nervous when calling a woman the first time; at forty I couldn't solve
the calculus problems I didn’t understand at twenty; after rereading and teaching Wuthering Heights so many times, the scenes I remembered best at forty-eight were those retained from my very first reading at twelve, four “generations” earlier. Me at 14, 18, 22, 26—life retold in units of four. Me at 21, 26, 31, 36, of fives. The folio method, the quarto method, the octavo—in halves, in fourths, by eighths. Life arranged in Fibonacci’s sequence: 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89. Or in Pascal’s: 4, 10, 20, 35, 56. Or by primes: 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31. Or in combinations of all three: I was handsome at twenty-one, why did I think I wasn’t; I had so much going for me at thirty-four, why then was I longing to be who I’d been at seventeen? At seventeen, I couldn’t wait to be twenty-three. At twenty-three, I longed to meet the girls I’d known at seventeen. At fifty-one, I’d have given anything to be thirty-five, and at forty-one was ready to dare things I was unprepared for at twenty-three. At twenty, thirty seemed the ideal age. At eighty, will I manage to think I’m half my age? Will there be summer in the snow?

Time’s covenants are all warped. We live Fibonacci lives: three steps forward, two steps back, or the other way around: three steps forward, five back. Or in both directions simultaneously, in the manner of spiders or of Bach’s crab canons, spinning combinations of scents and elective affinities in what turns out to be an endless succession of esters and fragrances that start from the simplest and fan out to the most complex: one carbon, two carbons, three carbons: six hydrogens, eight hydrogens, ten . . . $C_1H_2O_2$, ethyl formate; $C_2H_4O_2$, ethyl acetate; $C_3H_6O_2$, ethyl propionate; $C_4H_8O_2$, methyl butanoate (which has an apple aroma); $C_4H_8O_2$, propyl ethanoate (pea aroma); $C_5H_10O_2$, ethyl butyrate; $C_6H_{12}O_2$, ethyl valerate (banana); $C_6H_{12}NO_2$, methyl anthranilate (grape); $C_7H_{14}O_2$, benzylklyl ethanoate (peach); $C_8H_{18}O_2$, ethyl phenylethanoate (honey); $C_9H_{20}O_2$, octylethanoate (orange-apricot); $C_{10}H_{22}O_2$, ethyl decanoate (cognac); $C_{11}H_{22}O_2$, coumarin (lavender). Say lavender and you have a scent, a chain, a lifetime.

And here lay Mendeleyev’s genius. He understood that, though he could plot every element, many of these elements hadn’t been discovered yet. So he left blank spaces on his table—for missing elements, for elements to come—as though life’s events were cast in so orderly and idealized a numerical design that, even if we ignored when they’d occur or what effect they might have, we could still await them, still make room for them before their time. Thus, I too look at my life and stare at its blind spots: scents I never discovered; bottles I haven’t stumbled on and don’t know exist; selves I haven’t been but can’t claim to miss; pockets in time I should have but never did live through; people I could have met but missed out on; places I might have visited, gotten to love and ultimately lived in, but never traveled to. They are the blank tiles, the “rare-earth” moments, the roads never taken.
Part II

There is another fragrance, a woman's perfume. No one I know has ever worn it. So there is no one to associate it with.

I discovered it one fall evening on my way home after a graduate seminar. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, there is a high-end drugstore on Brattle Street, and sometimes, perhaps to dawdle and not head home sooner than I had to, I'd take the long way and stop inside. I liked Brattle Street around Harvard Square, especially in the early evening when the shops were all aglow and people were coming back from work, running last-minute errands, some with children in tow, the bustling traffic of people giving the sidewalks a heady feel I grew to love, if only because it seemed rife with prospects for the evening I already knew were false. The sidewalk was the only place I felt at home in this otherwise cold, anonymous part of town where I wasted so much time and so many years alone, and where everyone I knew always seemed so very busy doing such small things. I missed home, missed people, hated being alone, missed having tea, had tea alone to invoke the presence of someone over tea.

On such evenings Café Algiers was always crowded. It was good to drink tea with strangers, even if one didn't talk to them. A ziggurat of Twinings tins stood on a cluttered counter behind the cash register. I would eventually try each tea, from Darjeeling to Formosa Oolong to Lapsang Souchong and Gunpowder Green. I liked the idea of tea more than the flavors themselves, the way I liked the idea of tobacco more than of smoking, of people more than of friendship, of home more than my apartment on Craigie Street.

The pharmacy stood at the end of a stretch of stores near the corner of Church Street. It was the last spot before I'd turn and head home. I stepped in one evening. Inside, I discovered an entirely different world from the one I'd imagined. The tiny pharmacy was filled with luxury beauty products, luxury perfumes, shampoos of all nations, old world soaps, balms, lotions, striped toothbrushes, badgers, old empire shaving creams. I liked it in there. The antique cabinets, the ancient wares, the whole obsolescence of the shop, down to its outdated razors and aging, Central European owners, all seemed welcoming, solicitous. So I asked—because you couldn't loiter without buying something—for an aftershave I thought they wouldn't have, only to find that they not only carried it but that they sold its many companion products. So I was obliged to buy something I had stopped using a decade earlier.

A few days later, I was back, not just because the pharmacy helped put off my unavoidable walk home, or because I wished to repeat the experience of opening a door and lighting upon a universe of bygone toiletries,
but because the store had itself become a last stop in an imaginary old world before that world turned into what it really was: Cambridge.

I came again early one evening after seeing a French film at the Brattle Theater. During the showing, it had started to snow outside, and the snow, fast piling on Cambridge, gave every sign of turning into a blizzard that night. A luminous halo hung over Brattle Street just outside the theater, as it had in the small town of Clermont-Ferrand in the movie. In the near-total absence of traffic, some neighborhood children had gathered outside the Casablanca with their sleds and were about to head down towards the Charles River. I envied them.

I did not want to go home. Instead, I decided to trundle over to my pharmacy. It seemed as good a destination as any. I pushed in the glass door as fast as I could, stamping my feet outside before taking shelter within. A young, blond woman with a boy of about four was standing inside, holding a handkerchief to her son’s nose. The boy made an effort to blow but wasn’t successful. The mother smiled at him, at the salesgirl, at me, almost by way of apology, then folded the handkerchief and applied it to his nose again. “Noch einmal,” she added. The boy, sticking his head out of a red hood, blew. “Noch einmal,” she repeated with a tone of gentle entreaty, which reminded me of my own mother when she implored me to do things that were good for me, her voice filled with so vast a store of patience that it suddenly reminded me how distant I’d grown from the love of others. Within moments, a cold whiff of air blew into the store. The mother had opened the door and, with her child bundled up, walked out into the snow.

Only the salesgirl and I were left. Perhaps because she was no longer in the mood for business on such a spellbound evening, or because it was almost closing time, the salesgirl, who knew me by then, said she would let me smell something really special, and named a perfume. Had I heard of it? I thought I had—on second thought, I wasn’t sure. She ignored my attempted fib, and proceeded to open a tiny vial. Having moistened the glass stopper with the perfume, she dabbed it on her skin and in a gesture that made me think she was about to caress me on the cheek—which wouldn’t have surprised me because I’d always felt she had a weakness for me, which was also why I’d come back—she brought an exposed smooth wrist gently to my lips, which I would have kissed on impulse if I hadn’t seen the gesture performed at perfume counters before.

No fragrance I’d ever known before smelled anything remotely similar to this. I was at once in Thailand and in France and on a vessel bound through the Bosporus with women who wore furs in the summer and spoke of Webern’s Langsamer Satz as they turned to me and whispered “Noch einmal?” It eclipsed every fragrance I’d known. It had lavender, but lavender derealized, deferred, dissembled, which is why I asked her to let me smell
her wrist again, but she'd seen through my request, and wasn't sure, as I wasn't sure, that it was limited to perfume alone. Instead, she dabbed the bottle stopper on a scent strip, which she snapped out of a tiny wad filled with other strips, waved the paper ever so lightly in the air to let it dry, and then handed it to me, with a look of complicity that suggested she wasn't about to be fooled by my curiosity and had already guessed that there were at least two women in my life who'd want nothing more than to see the scent strip I'd bring home that evening turn into a gift vial within days. That look flattered me no end.

I came back two evenings later, and then again, not for the store now, not for the snow, or for the elusive luster that hovered over Brattle Street in the evening, but for the revelation in that perfume bottle, for the women in furs who smoked Balkans aboard a yacht, while watching the Hellespont drift in the distance. I did not even know whether the perfume was my reason for being in there or whether it had become an excuse, the mask behind the mask, because if it was the salesgirl I was after, or the women that the flicker in her eyes had invoked, I also felt that behind her was the image of another woman, my mother, in another perfume store, though I sensed that she too perhaps was nothing more than a mask, behind which was my father, years and years ago now, as he stood by the mirror, pleased to be the man he was when he dabbed lavender water on his cheeks after shaving. He too, perhaps, like all the others now, reduced to a threadbare mask for the love and the happiness I was trying to find and despaired I'd ever know. The scent summoned me like a numinous mirage from across a divide so difficult to cross that I thought it might not have anything to do with love either, for love couldn't be the source of so much hardship, and therefore perhaps that love itself was a mask, and that if it wasn't love I was after, then the very tip of this vortex around which I'd been circling had to do with me—just me—but a me that was squandered on so many spaces, and on so many layers, that it shifted like mercury the moment I touched it, or hid away like lanthanides, or flared up only to turn into the dullest substance a moment later.

The perfume was so expensive that all I could take with me, after coming up with more excuses, which seemed to prove to the salesgirl that there were other women in my life, was a sprinkle on a paper swab. I kept the swab with me, as if it belonged to someone who had gone away for a while and wouldn't forgive me if I didn't sniff it each day.

About a week later, after seeing the same film, I rushed out of the theater and headed towards the pharmacy, only to find that it had already closed. I stayed around for a few minutes, thinking back to the evening when I'd seen the mother and son there, remembering her blond hair bundled under her hat and her eyes that had roamed around the store and lingered on mine.
while she urged her son on, sensing I both wanted and envied her. Had she overplayed her maternal gaze to forestall any attempt at conversation? Had the salesgirl intercepted my glance?

Now, I pictured mother and son coming out of the store, the mother struggling to open her umbrella on Church Street as they headed out towards the Cambridge Common, plodding across the empty field with their colored boots sinking deep into the snow, their backs forever turned to me. It felt so real, and they seemed to disappear with such haste as the wind gusted at their backs, that I caught an impulse to cry out with the only words I knew, "Mrs. Noch Einmal, Mrs. Noch Einmal." 

At the time I thought they were an imaginary wife and an imaginary son, the ones I so desperately wished might be mine one day. Me coming back from work and getting off at Harvard Square, she on a last-minute errand before dinner, buying him a toy at the drugstore because she'd promised him one that morning—so what if we spoiled him a bit! just fancy, running into each other in the snow, on this day of all days. But now, through the distance of years, I think she may have been my mother, and the little boy, me. Or perhaps all this is, as ever, a mask. I was both me and my father, me as a student who'd gone to the movies instead of the library, me as the boy's better father, who'd probably have let him savor childhood a bit longer, me in the future giving me the boy vague tips about things to come, all of it reminding me that the crib notes we sneak through time are written in invisible ink. Then I'm filled with a sense of wonder that reminds me of Pascal when, for one short-lived moment on the night of November 23rd, 1654, the universe finally came together for him and made him write "Joy" three times.

The boy from the pharmacy is thirty years old today—five years older than I was on the day I felt old enough to be his father. Yet, if I am younger still today than he is at thirty, I was on that day in the snow far older than either of us is today.

From time to time I revisit that perfume, especially when I wade through the cosmetics counters on the first floor of large department stores. Invariably I play dumb—"What's this?" I ask, playing the hapless husband trying to buy a last-minute gift. And they tell me, and they try it on for me, sometimes on their own wrists, and they give me sample strips, which I stick in my coat pocket, and take them out, and put them back in, dreaming back to those days when I dreamed of a life I'm no longer sure I lived.

Perhaps fragrance is the ultimate mask, the mask between me and the world, between me and me, the other me, the shadow me I trail and get hints of but cannot know, sensing all along that talk of another me is itself the most insidious mask of all. But then perhaps fragrance is nothing more than a metaphor for the "no" I brought to everything I saw when I could so
easily have said “yes”—to myself, to my father, to life—perhaps because I never loved any of the things of the world well enough and hoped to hide it from myself by thinking I could do better by looking elsewhere, or because I loved and wanted each and couldn’t determine which to settle for, and therefore stored the very best till a second life rolled in. As irony would have it, the one perfume I want is the one I never purchased. It is also the one every woman I’ve known has cunningly refused to wear. So there is no one to remember it by. The perfume conjures an imagined life, it conjures no one.

Last winter I returned to the same pharmacy with my nine-year-old son. We did the rounds, as I always do nowadays whenever I go back to places I’ve spun too many coats around to even bother wondering whether I’ve ever loved them or not. As usual I pretend to be looking for my wife. “Do you think Mom would like this one?” I ask my son, hoping he’ll say no, which he does. I apologize. We look at toothbrushes, soaps, ancient toothpastes, even my father’s aftershave sits before me, staring almost with reproof. I let him smell it. He likes it. I ask whether he recognizes it. He does. We sample another. He likes that one too. He is, I catch myself hoping, making his own memories.

Finding nothing to buy, we open the glass door and leave. Taking a quick right we walk towards the Common. I try to tell him that I’d once had a glimpse of him there almost three decades ago. He looks at me as if I’m crazy. Or was it just me I’d seen decades ago, I ask? This is crazy too, he says. I want to tell him about Frau Noch Einmal, but I can’t find the right words. Instead, I tell him I am glad he is with me. He cracks a joke. I crack one back.

But I stop all the same and stand a moment on the very same spot and remember the night I’d nearly shouted noch einmal to the winds on the snowed-on, empty Cambridge streets, thinking of the German woman and of her lucky husband coming back from work every evening. Here, at twenty-five, I had conjured the life I wished to live one day. Now, at fifty, I was revisiting the life I’d dreamed of living.

Had I lived it? Had I lived my life? And which mattered more and which did I recall best: the one I’d dreamed up or the one I led indeed? Or am I already forgetting both before my time, with life taking back, one by one, the things I thought were mine to keep, turning the cards face down, one by one, to deal someone else another hand?
The house where we’re staying near Aix-en-Provence is surrounded by lavender bushes that seem to billow and wave whenever a wind courses through the fields. Tomorrow is our last day in Provence, and we’ve already washed all of our clothes to let them dry in the sun. I know that the next time I’ll put on this shirt will be in Manhattan. I know too how the scent of sunlight and lavender trapped within its folds will bring me back to this most luminous day in Provence.

It is ten o’clock in the morning and I am standing in this garden next to a wicker hamper that is filled with today’s wash. My wife doesn’t know it yet, but I’ve decided to hang the laundry myself. It’s meant as a surprise. I’ve already brewed coffee.

So here I am, hanging one towel after the other, the boys’ underwear, their many T-shirts, their socks flecked with the reddish clay from Roussillon which, I hope, will never wash off. I like the smell. I like separating the shirts on the line, leaving no more than half an inch between them. I must manage my pins and use them sparingly, making sure I’ll have enough for the whole load. I know my wife will still find something to criticize in my method. The thought amuses me. I like the work, its mind-numbing pace which makes everything seem so simple, so complacent. I want it never to end. I can see why people take forever to hang clothes out to dry. I like the smell of parched wood on the hanging pins, which are stored in a clay pot. I like the smell of clay too. I like the sound of drops trickling from our large towels onto the pebbles, on my feet. I like standing barefoot, like the sheets, which take forever to hang evenly and need three pins, one at each end, and one for good measure in the middle. I turn around and before picking up another shirt, I run my fingers through a stalk of lavender nearby. How easy it is to touch lavender. To think I fussed so much and for so long—and yet here it is, given to me, the way gold was given to the Incas who didn’t think twice before handing it over to strangers. There is nothing to want here. Quod cupis mecum est. What I want, I already have.

Yesterday we went to see the Abbey of Senanques. I took pictures of my sons standing in front of a field of lavender. From a distance, the lavender is so dark it looks like a bruise upon a sea of green. Closer by, each plant looks like an ordinary overgrown bush. I taught them how to rub their hands along lavender blossoms without disturbing the bees. We spoke of Cistercian monks and the production of dyes, of spirits, balms and scented extracts, and of St. Bernard de Clervaux, and of medieval commerce routes that still exist today and that spread from these tiny abbeys to the rest of the world. For all I know my love of lavender may have started right here, in an essence gathered from bushes that grow on these very same fields. For
all I know this is where it ends, in the beginning. And yet, for all I know, everything could start all over again—my father, my mother, the girl with the perfumed wrist, Frau Noch Einmal, her little boy, my little boy, myself as a little boy, the walk in the evening snow, the genie in the bottle, the Rosetta stone within each one of us which no one, not even love or friendship, can unburden, the life we think of each day, and the life not lived, and the life half-lived, and the life we wish we'd learn to live while we still have time, and the life we want to rewrite if only we could, and the life we know remains unwritten and may never be written at all, and the life we hope others may live far better than we have, all of it, for all I know, braided on one thread, into which is spun something as simple as the desire to be one with the world, to find something instead of nothing, and having found something, never to let go, be it even a stalk of lavender.

NOTE
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