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## The Perfume of the Dying

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Throughout her life, my Aunt Peggy wore perfume like an accessory—a different one for every day, and plenty of it. Her scents came out of the Avon catalog and had exotic names like *Ariane* and *Foxfire*, florals and musks that hung on my clothes long after she'd left a room. The perfume decanters on her vanity were like a row of hothouse flowers, pink and amber and white, full-sized and “purse-sized.” Even the mini ones they threw in the shopping bag as extras were on display. As a girl, I loved to sample them, usually two or three at a time.

The long-forgotten memory of the bottles comes back to me as I sit on the edge of a hospital bed in Maryland, squeezing Aunt Peggy's hand. It is a cold night in February, and my aunt is as white and gray as the hospital walls. She is in the advanced stages of metastasized lung cancer and going into septic shock. She can no longer speak, but she turns her head in my direction, her mouth slightly open. I caress her opalescent arms and try to talk in soothing tones, knowing that each breath takes us closer to the inevitable. Hers, weak



and slow, and mine, way too fast. I will myself to stay calm, so I inhale. All around us is a dense, sweet smell, the telltale scent of the dying.

A lifelong smoker, Aunt Peggy wore perfume in part to mask the smell of cigarette smoke, that other smell that I always associated with her. Unlike her wanton taste in perfume, she was a loyalist when it came to cigarettes; only Virginia Slim menthols, famous for the “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” slogan, would do. My aunt had started smoking as a teenager in the 1960s, back when it seemed sexy and cool. She was definitely sexy and cool, but the cigarettes only enhanced those qualities. They didn’t create them. In one of my favorite photos of her from that time, she is wearing pedal pushers and patent leather heels, her hair done up in a bouffant and her lips painted bright red, with a cigarette held aloft in her elegant, manicured hand.

By the 1980s, my aunt was a middle-aged, childless divorcée with a two-pack-a-day habit. Accordingly, her voice had taken on a gravelly timbre that somehow matched her brassy, fun demeanor. My parents had divorced by then, with my father awarded sole custody. Straining under a high-powered government job, he invited my aunt—his only sibling—to help take care of my younger brother and me, offering her a room in our house, a weekly stipend, and a built-in family. In her free time, she sold encyclopedias door-to-door. She became fast friends with the local Avon lady, and they would light up together in my father’s kitchen, poring over makeup and perfume samples.



We made room for both my aunt's perfume bottles and her cigarettes in our lives. My aunt loved to dance around the house singing songs. The Everly Brothers' "Bye Bye Love" was one of her favourites. She would sing, "*Bye bye love ... bye bye happiness ...*," flinging ash on our carpet. She once burned my forearm with a cigarette as she swung me around, horrifying my father. I rubbed some cold water on it. What was a little burn when there was dancing to be done?

My aunt was awfully partisan when it came to my brother and me. When my dad wasn't looking, she would sneak me cans of soda and bags of Doritos. Later, when I lost my virginity, she was the first person I told. Her eyes widened, but when I begged her not to tell my father, she agreed. She was not my mother; she was my accomplice. When I met the man who would become my husband, she bought me my wedding dress. When I walked down the aisle, I could smell her perfume before I could actually see her, and when I did, she had tears in her eyes.

A few years ago, when we found my father dead of a heart attack on his living room floor, my aunt helped make all the arrangements, negotiating with the funeral home like the tough-cookie saleswoman she was. She smoked a lot of cigarettes then.

There was a time in my know-it-all twenties when I tried to get her to quit. In fact, I was downright judgmental about her smoking habit, sending her preachy cards and emails. I asked her to smoke outside my house, even when it was unbearably



hot or cold. I wrinkled up my nose when she gave me a birthday gift and a smoky odor wafted up from the tissue paper. I wasn't always very nice. In those moments, I told myself that I had her best interests at heart. Now I realize that I really only had mine. I wanted her to stay with me, and for our lives to remain as they were, full of perfume and dancing. She knew before I did that that was impossible.

As the years went on, Aunt Peggy's voice grew hoarser; her breathing raspy and strained. She began to have bouts of coughing and confusion. After she'd fainted getting out of bed one morning, she finally visited the doctor, who confirmed our worst fears—Stage 4 lung cancer, with a poor prognosis. "That's what I get for fifty years of smoking," Aunt Peggy said matter-of-factly, without tears or self-recrimination. She began chemotherapy. When her hair fell out, she bought pert wigs ("I have brown hair again!") and spritzed cologne on the diaphanous scarves she tied around her head. She wore her trademark red lipstick to her chemo appointments. She lived one day at a time, the way we all ought to live and almost never do. She kept smoking.

One day, a brain scan revealed a large mass. The oncologist immediately ordered a round of radiation, but I heard the tone of last resort in her voice. Eventually, our options ran out.

And so I sit in this hospital room, surrounded by the perfume of the dying. I have heard that our bodies have myriad ways of informing us when organs are shutting down, and this peculiar scent is



one of them. It has been described on medical forums as a “sickly, fruity smell” and is often associated with lung and other cancers. Physicians going back to Hippocrates have made the link between disease and certain odours, and so none of the medical staff attending to my aunt seem concerned about the strange smell. What’s surprising is that I’m not bothered either. It reminds me of hiking through apple orchards in Pennsylvania in the fall, when they are thick with the scent of fallen apples, often split open by opportunistic animals and left to ferment in the sun.

My aunt falls into a sleep from which I know she will never wake. I notice her purse, sticking out of a half-open drawer. I lift it out, carefully, and unzip it quietly. The purse contains a single, small bottle of perfume—*Sung for Women*. I take off the cap and inhale, catching citrus and floral notes and musky undertones. I desperately want to spray the perfume on my aunt’s thin wrists. I long to paint her pale lips red and offer her a cigarette. I wish she would dance and sing. *Bye bye love ... bye bye happiness ...*

Instead, I take her translucent hand in mine. I try to thank her without actually saying the words, because that feels too final, but I believe she knows. Her breath slows. I inhale the strange perfume, this last, intimate expression of her humanity. The scent lingers long after she’s gone, and in this one vital, glorious way, nothing has changed.

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