



I sometimes feel faintly embarrassed about saying that Chanel No 5 is my favourite perfume. It seems so obvious, so route one, like saying that *Citizen Kane* is your favourite film, Shakespeare your favourite playwright, *The Mona Lisa* your favourite painting. But sometimes, things are seen as the best because they simply are. There's no use fighting a towering icon for the sake of originality. But to me, No 5 goes beyond even that. It's true to say that outside of those within my immediate family, the most enduring relationship of my life has been with this 96-year-old French perfume.

My first encounter with No 5 came when I was 12. I'd been wearing the wonderful Miss Dior for a year or so, since my mother had returned, slightly tipsy, from a French trip with a little houndstooth box in her hand, and I'd become immediately hooked on fine perfume. I'd always been aware of Chanel's flagship perfume – the way one is of great icons – via Marilyn Monroe's legendary quote about retiring to bed in nothing but No 5, and those glossy magazine ads featuring actress Carole Bouquet embracing a gigantic crystal flacon of scent. I'd carefully cut them out and Blu-Tacked them to my bedroom wall, next to Madonna

and Morrissey. Finally getting to smell No 5 for myself took on a weird urgency.

And it didn't disappoint. Aside from its perfect, revolutionary composition of flowers and aldehydes that somehow smell both powdery and fizzy at the same time, it smelled overwhelmingly of "grown up". It's a proper

And so I saved up my Saturday job wages for weeks until I finally had enough to buy myself a small bottle of eau de toilette.

I soon moved on to the eau de parfum (I still think this is No 5's finest incarnation), but its importance remained huge. No 5 went with me, along with my other most precious belongings, into my nylon PE bag and onto a train to

a few years later, I was devastated, confused, bereft and only a fortnight out of maternity clothes. And yet there was never any doubt in my mind as to how I'd approach the intimidating, emotionally perilous event that was his funeral. I automatically reached for No 5, as though holding on to an old friend to stop me falling.

Of course, as a confirmed beauty addict, I can never claim to be monogamously faithful to No 5. I wear it perhaps once a fortnight these days. But, equally, I absolutely know that Chanel No 5 will never leave my dressing table for as long as I live. We've been through way too much together. I will never forsake it, because I've come to understand that what No 5 really offers me is courage. I call it Backbone In A Bottle for its uniquely bolstering qualities. When I'm wearing it, I feel able to tackle anything – even the divorce court, where absolutely everything except my scent felt horribly unfamiliar.

I know that whatever the day and whatever else is going on, my Chanel No 5 is taking care of business in the most elegant and utterly correct way possible.

"IT'S BACKBONE IN A BOTTLE"

From her wedding day to her father's funeral, Chanel No 5 has always been there for Sali Hughes. Here she explains why

perfume for adult women who know that they're fabulous and don't need to scream about it. It smells successful without ever being gaudy or gauche. It's unapologetically feminine but in no way girlie and twee. It's welcoming and soft, but uncompromising and refined. No 5 was basically everything that I longed to be, bottled. It was a passport to adulthood.

London, when I ran away from home at just 15. It came raving with me, it was with me when I lost my virginity, and it accessorised countless Lycra dresses, customised DMs and reclaimed Levi's. For my wedding day, at 27, I wouldn't countenance any other perfume. No 5 had always been there, and now it would walk me down the aisle, along with my father. When he died just

