

# The Scent of a Novel

By [Julia Berick](#)

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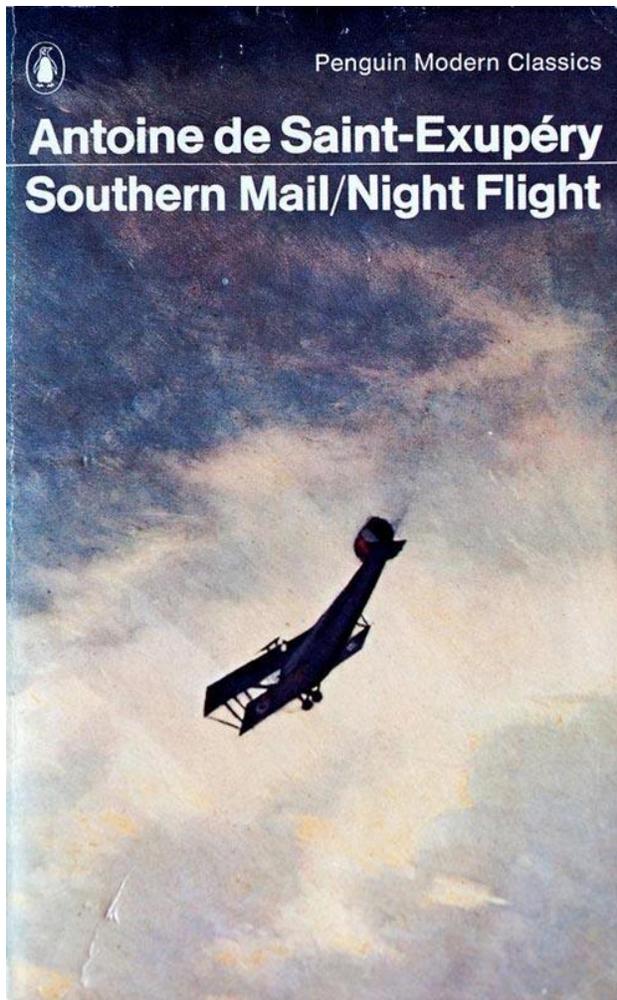
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While writing my master's thesis on DeLillo's *Underworld*, I reached a strange level of intimacy with the book. I realized I wanted to wear it around my neck—not as an albatross but as adornment. Some people want to consume the things they love; I want to be subsumed by them.

I wanted the novel pressed against my skin at all times, all one thousand pages of it. It wasn't the first or the last time I wanted to be submerged. I have wanted to bathe in Marguerite Duras and Henry James and, most recently, *Night Flight*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

It was only relatively recently that I realized, to my enormous delight, that many books have been transformed into purchasable perfumes. Could these expensive vials contain the perfume equivalent of a tone poem? Could they transcend homage and become the synesthetic translation of the reading experience? As I am deeply dedicated to arguing for the deeply subjective, I realized I had a quest before me. I truffled up four perfumes to try. There were quite a few tempting perfumes I did not review, because I had not already read and loved the book in a way that would allow me to evaluate the scent. In every case, I made notes about what I thought the book should smell like before I smelled its tribute.



*Vol de nuit*, or *Night Flight*, was a sensation in France. Upon reading it, Monsieur Jacques Guerlain, like myself, wanted to atomize the book and send it drifting over the shoulders of all his favorite women. The brand's contemporary marketing maintains that Guerlain and Saint-Exupéry were friends. In 1933, the perfumer was inspired to produce the scent Vol de Nuit by his love of of the man and of the romance of flight. Stacy Schiff's thorough biography merely notes, "Saint-Exupéry's feelings about the perfume have not been recorded." A much more satisfying explanation is that the book itself, not its author, was the muse. Elegant and daring, the prose leaves the reader in a synesthetic stupor.

I wanted a perfume that would unfurl like this description of piloting does: “The engine’s five-hundred horse-power fed in its texture a very gentle current, fraying its ice-cold rind into a velvety bloom.” And it does.

My grandmother wore Shalimar, perhaps the most famous Guerlain perfume. The first notes of *Vol de Nuit* are of my grandmother, and beneath that, a scent that is evocative of spaces and surfaces from a lost era. Too bad that *grandmother* so often recalls a woman whose femininity has become a burden or joke (pink bedroom slippers, doilies). My grandmother smelled like the time when deep-pile carpet was luxury and Lucite was the future. She smelled like the high polish of wood waxed regularly. So does *Vol de nuit*, and then it lifts right off. The smell gets spicier and spicier. Maybe it is the dials glowing as the light wanes:

He touched the switches, but the red light falling from the cockpit lamps upon the dial hands was so diluted with the blue evening glow that they did not catch its color. When he passed his fingers close before a bulb, they were hardly tinged at all. “Too soon.” But night was rising like a tawny smoke and already the valleys were brimming over with it.

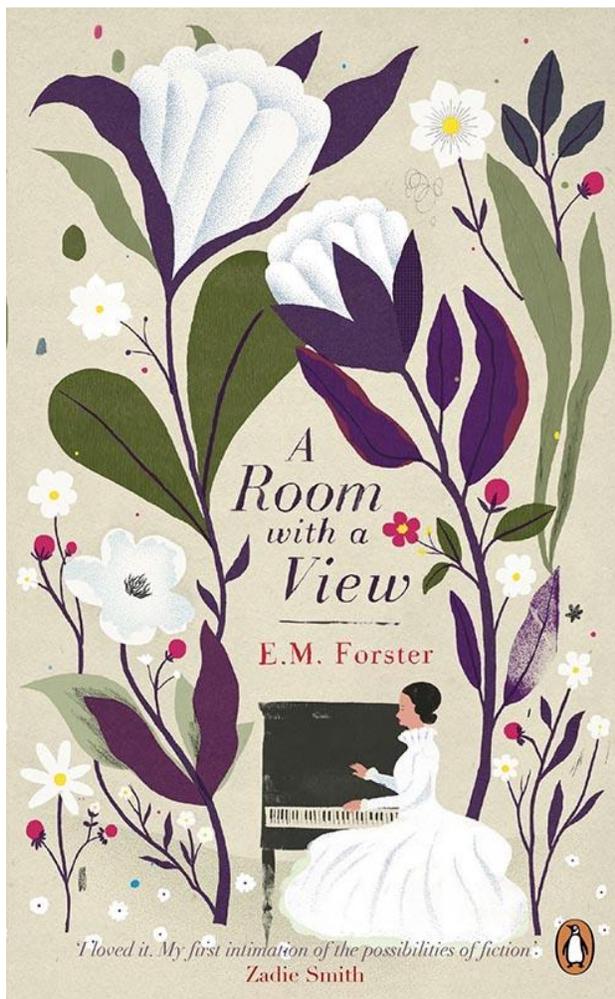
I felt I could smell the salt of the stars in *Vol de nuit*. The scent includes galbanum, the aromatic gum resin of plants that grow in the mountain ranges of northern Iran. It’s one of those perfume ingredients so ancient that it makes an appearance in the Bible (the Old Testament). The Lord himself says to Moses that to make a very fine incense he ought to “weight out equal amounts of stacte, and oncha, and galbanum with frankincense and to season it with salt.” So it is written.

After the stars, *Vol de nuit* banks, catching the last of the sun, which to me smells like cinnamon, and fades. Then jasmine takes over. As Saint-Exupéry writes, “now all grew luminous, his hands, his clothes, the wings ... the clouds beneath threw up the flakes the moon was pouring on them; on every hand they loomed like towers of snow. A

milk stream of light flowed everywhere, laving the plane and the crew.” Amen.

**My Vol de Nuit:** Silk, gasoline, iron, mahogany, pampas grass, cinnamon, warm tarmac.

**Guerlain’s Vol de Nuit:** “The green galbanum top note is surprising. The cocktail of blended flowers at its heart is like fireworks, where daffodil, violet, carnation, jasmine, and rose reveal their assertive and impertinent character. At once a chypre, woody and exotic, Vol de Nuit is absolutely inimitable.”



E. M. Forster is one of my favorite novelists. His otherworldly prose walks through the physical realm, gliding from calling cards and umbrellas to the eternity of existence. Take this account of a low-level clerk treating himself to the adventure of walking through the night: “He had visited the county of Surrey when darkness covered its amenities, and its coy villas had re-entered ancient night.” To wear a perfume that smelled like *A Room with a View* would, I hoped, give me the same pleasure as watching the Merchant Ivory film adaptation, or even better, the feeling of almost drifting right into your favorite book, as happens only when you are ten years old. In that regard, *A Room with a View* by CB I Hate Perfume was a success.

The book, like many by Forster, is about fighting one’s way through the powder of Edwardian social expectations. Forster’s heroes and heroines are armed only with a slightly more robust idea of sex than other people. They are “not beautiful, not supremely brilliant, but filled with something that took the place of both qualities—something best described as a profound vivacity, a continual and sincere response to all that she encountered in her path through life.” The perfume *A Room with a View* also fights through the powder, but with the scent of violets and grass and apparently fennel.

Violets are thought to have originated in Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon. They came to be associated with Italy when a strain was successfully bred by Conte di Brazza—Conte Savorgnan di Brazza, in Udine, Italy, around 1880. By the time Proust was a child, Parma violets were a common enough cultural touchstone to cloud his associations with Stendhal’s *Charterhouse of Parma* and to scent his dreams of Italy. In finally meeting the Princess di Parma, Proust admits, “For years now, like a perfumer adding fragrance to a solid block of fat, I had been drenching this name, Princess of Parma, with the scent of thousands of violets.”

Violets scent the essential scene in *A Room with a View*: the moment when the hero, George, who was raised outside the strictures of society, kisses the heroine, Lucy, who was raised within them. Their erotic encounter is enabled by “lusty” Italians who drive a small party of English tourists up a sun-drenched hill to see a famous view.

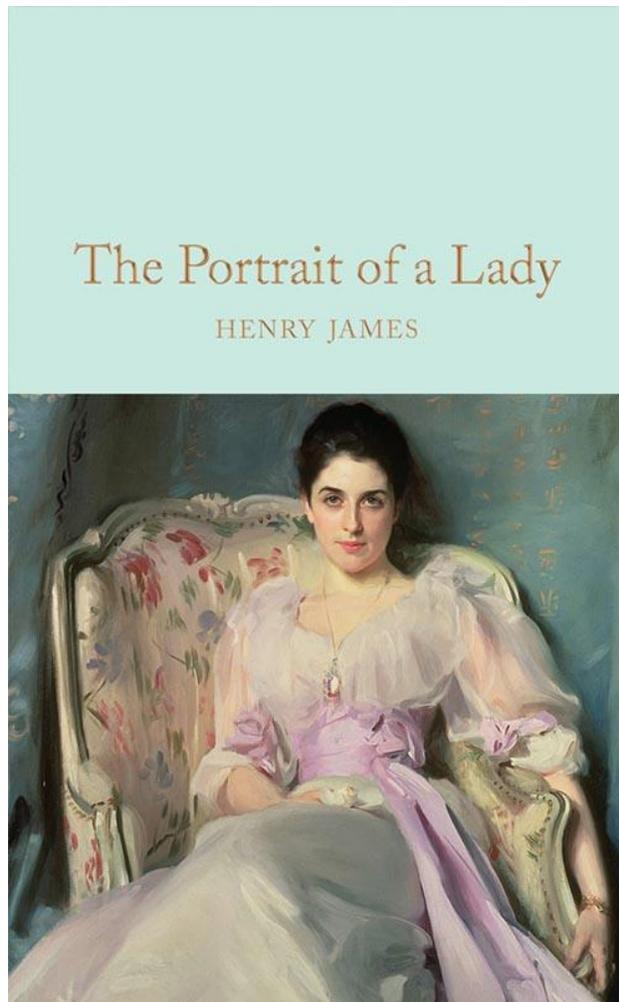
Having lost track of the party on the hillside, Lucy asks one of the drivers to direct her to the clergyman, her safest friend in the group. The driver intentionally (or unintentionally) misunderstands her request for help finding “the good man” and leads her to George. It is exactly the kind of lost-in-translation moment that Forster loved so dearly. Those who misunderstand the staid English ways are those who understand life best of all:

At the same moment the ground gave way, and with a cry she fell out of the wood. Light and beauty enveloped her. She has fallen on to a little open terrace, which was covered with violets from end to end ... Standing at its brink, like a swimmer who prepares, was the good man. But he was not the good man she had expected and he was alone.

It is a beautiful climax. In typical Forster fashion, it isn't even the beginning of the end of the story. Christian Brosius quotes it in his meditation on the perfume's origins. He tempers the violets with wild fennel and dusty earth tones. Brosius's project is to play with the whole idea of scent and what gets honored in a perfume, but he's mirrored the book almost too faithfully. Would I wear it always? No. Does it smell just like it was directed by Ismail Merchant? Certainly. Just introduce a little sweat and a little gasoline and you're on a roof in Lower Manhattan.

**My Room with a View:** Fern, sweet peas, terra-cotta, public fountain, violets, Beethoven.

**CB I Hate Perfume's Room with a View:** “This perfume captures the scent of the hills above Florence—the vineyards, the wild grass, the finocchio, the hot dusty Florentine earth. And of course a torrent of Violets ...”



Pick up a copy of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* and you may think you are already holding a bottle of perfume. It is heavy and lambent with meaning and also, forgive me Henry, a little frivolous. Isabel Archer is a woman who is cursed by her blessings. Her downfall is brought about by her naive confidence, along with too much beauty, too much intelligence, and too large an inheritance. She traipses through perfectly tended gardens troubled by disappointment. My mother, when I begged her to reread the book, was as frustrated by the novel as she would be by the perfume. Both, she might argue, are restricted by our ideas of femininity. Where is Isabel's agency? Isn't she, like a rose perfume, a bit hackneyed? But of all those I tried, the *Portrait of a Lady* most resembled its novel namesake. Under all those roses is something like a patina-marred mirror: reflective, hard won,

and sophisticated. James has an appreciation for items made precious by time and experience: old paintings, old world, old gold. This perfume matures as you wear it. It somehow smells of mature flowers, roses just after their peak, and, I believe, it matures the wearer as well.

Dominique Ropion's concoction for Frédéric Malle boasts of four hundred Turkish roses per hundred-milliliter bottle. A sniff seems to confirm this wealth. James, who also deals in excess, draws his heroine in an early sketch as a woman whose

nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one's spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses.

Caught in all that Jamesian language I had hardly noticed the sexual suggestion. Ropion shouts it: "A lapful of roses." Superficially admired, only the wearer really gets to experience the complicated darker notes, the frankincense, berries, and spice, and the roses that get richer just when they start to spoil.

**My Portrait of a Lady:** Rose, new grass, iris bulb, satin, old gold.

**Frédéric Malle's Portrait of a Lady:** Rose, spice, patchouli, benzoin, frankincense, berry.



Simone de Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay* has a closed, fragrant intimacy that is not necessarily pleasant. The book is a stunning feat of female dependence, autonomy, and risk. But what does a toxic female relationship smell like? Wet wool, waxy sweat mixed with waxy cosmetics, a new dress that has been worn too many times between washings, sexual adventures, gin, sexual misadventures. *She Came to Stay* has all that, mingled with the impending fear of war. "You told me in September that even if the war came we'd have to go on living," the de Beauvoir character, Françoise, says to the Sartre character, Pierre. And go on they do, in a world that is "always winter and never Christmas." When a young woman, Xavière, enters their lives as a complex third in their relationship, it first stirs, then enlivens, then

finally poisons the waters. In one pivotal scene, Françoise realizes it is too late to put on the brakes:

“But I have no wish to dance,” she said; this chorus of affection was making her feel ill at ease. “Well, do you mind if we two dance?” said Pierre. Françoise watched them; they were a pleasure to look at. Xavière danced, as light as a puff of smoke, seeming to skin over the floor; Pierre’s body, though heavy, gave the impression of being released from the laws of gravity and controlled by the invisible threads; he had the miraculous ease of a marionette.

Xavière’s refusal to exit their lives spoils their union. Her room becomes, like that of many adolescents, the changing canvas of her emotions. She sometimes plays adult, but it is only an act. The scents in this novel are foul and threatening. One concierge describes the adolescent’s brew: “I pointed out to her that she had been throwing tea-leaves, lumps of cotton-wool and slops in [the basin] ... There are cigarette ends and fruit pips in every corner.”

But what does pitiless youth smell like? Timothy Han seems to have sidestepped this issue when creating a perfume. The perfume is an adult, unisex scent. Its qualities suggest only the more attractive aspects of love triangles. There is a tobacco flavor that sits comfortably with a costly rye. There is a leather banquette and a dance floor, but no incineration. The perfume itself is one I would gravitate toward, but it is nothing like the book.

Xavière is psychopathic in her youth, like a toddler or like my own adolescent friend, who took every social norm as a hypothetical. Putting my nose to *She Came to Stay* mingled my feelings about the book with other scent memories. Instead of sitting in a French café, I was sixteen years old, sitting in the closet of my friend’s room awaiting her sharp judgments, the cheap incense of teenage years giving the illusion of gravity to our conversation. The perfume is lovely. I can never wear it.

**My *She Came to Stay*:** Wet wool, lipstick, used tea leaves, sweat, tobacco.

**Timothy Han's *She Came to Stay*:** Geranium, basil, lemon, Indonesian clove, nutmeg, patchouli, vetiver, labdanum, oakmoss, cedarwood.

There is the danger of a perfume telling a story too faithfully, or of commodifying a scent that was never meant to be pleasant. Wearing *Portrait of a Lady* around the city gave me a pleasure I couldn't quantify or anticipate. When someone complimented the scent, I smiled for Henry, for Isabel, for Ropion, and for myself. As a younger woman I never chose rose perfumes, but in the space of a few months, it seems, I became a lady.

But as the summer passed, I dashed through several more novels that would likely never make it into bottles. I longed to wear them, too. And yet, whether the perfumers get to them or not, perhaps every novel can be pinioned like a butterfly. I'll still dream about their scents. Perhaps I'll catch them in the air of a polished vestibule on a late-December evening.

*Julia Berick is a writer who lives in New York. She works at The Paris Review.*

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