



# The Healing Power of Scent

Last year, Anita Bhagwandas suffered the loss of one of her closest friends. Here she reveals the role fragrance played in recalling precious memories

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTINA K

**W**e think we pick our own scents, but we don't. They hold all the cards, choosing us when we least expect it, then burrowing deep into our psyches and staying there impenetrably.

When I was growing up, my mother had a predilection for heady Eighties power fragrances so my affection for heavy floral scents chose me from infancy. As an admittedly precocious child, being able to identify Lou Lou, Trésor and Poison before being able to spell my own surname was a given (I still struggle with the latter at times) and being enveloped in those heady, narcotic aromas felt closer than my own skin.

While my teenage contemporaries wafted about in any number of watery concoctions (hello CK One and L'Eau D'Issey), I near enough bathed in some of the sickliest, civet-heavy scents known to the olfactory world – Joy by Jean Patou, Coco by Chanel and the original 'power player', Jicky by Guerlain. Those cloying fragrances announced my shuffled arrival when my gentle presence wasn't imposing enough. They became a coat of armour during a crisis in confidence, protecting me through a particularly taxing relationship, comforting me when he dumped me on MySpace – delightful chap – and seeing me through a displacing move to London from south Wales. Wearing those three fragrances – my fragrances – gave me the strength to tackle any feat and triumph. Or at least, they did.

On recently receiving Maison Francis Kurkdjian's latest nectar Aqua Vitae, £115, a dormant olfactory recollection sprang to mind as soon as I removed the golden lid and spritzed. The ardent masculine undertone of guaiacwood – an earthy sawdust-like scent – was so intoxicating it forcibly made me gasp, flashing me back to my student years. We were walking back to my house in the twilight hours after one of many spontaneous nights of drinking,

dancing and listening to records. My first editor and close friend James was older and achingly cool (he'd laugh at that), echoing Jordan Catalano's untouchable allure in *My So-Called Life*, including those ferociously intense azure eyes. But his geeky, encyclopaedic knowledge of music and obscure facts had bound us instantly as friends when we first met some years before.

As an only child, James was the big brother I'd never had but always longed for. As the Welsh winter nights

### “HIS SCENT WAS A SECURITY BLANKET OF THE MOST NATURAL AND INSTINCTIVE KIND”

set in, he'd bundle me up in his thick navy coat as we continued home, jovially putting the world to rights. Each time he threw that heavy coat around me, I'd burrow my face into its scratchy woollen fibres and the scent of his skin always lingered: musky, slightly salty, woody and masculine but without a hint of cologne. A scent strong enough to embed in my mind, but gentle enough to offer reassurance. I genuinely believed I'd always be OK if he was around. His scent was a security blanket of the most instinctive and natural kind.

### THE SCIENCE OF SCENT

We've used scent to soothe and offer respite for aeons. In the Neolithic period, fragrant ointments were used to cure a variety of maladies, while aromatherapy is so-called for its ability to offer solace in a moment of discord. Lavender-infused smelling salts were the go-to Victorian remedy for the plant's ability to reduce a soaring heart rate and placate levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Studies also show that frankincense, which was traditionally burnt in

homes to bring about good health, is proven to soothe the respiratory tract, slowing our breathing and evoking a sense of calm.

Smell does more than just offer a little cursory consolation; it can change our behaviour entirely as fragrance expert Roja Dove discloses: “Scent is our first response to encroaching stimuli, whether that's sniffing sour milk before we drink it or smelling a fire before we see it, often making us anxious. It's the same with soothing scents – they have a cocooning effect that relaxes us.”

When scent enters the nose, it travels through the cranial nerves straight to the olfactory bulb which helps the brain process smell. This bulb is part of the limbic system and can easily access the amygdalae, a group of nuclei which play a vital role in our emotional memories.

“That's why scent isn't just an accessory or a device to mask odour, it's a brain-altering cocktail of ingredients,” Dove continues.

It's curious, too, that when areas of the brain connected to memory are damaged, the ability to identify smell is also impaired, while studies into the brains of those suffering from depression have shown that their sense of smell is significantly reduced. Fragrance can uplift us in other ways, too. In an Austrian study, researchers wafted the smell of oranges and lavender in front of participants, who felt less anxious, more positive and calmer compared with participants who were exposed to no fragrance at all. And a study at Wheeling Jesuit University in the USA found that peppermint increased motivation and confidence – at one point, Reebok even built a peppermint smell into some of its sports bras to play on this effect during athletic activity.

### A MOMENT IN TIME

But as powerful as scent is, it can't turn back time. Last August, while *Stylist* was creating its art



ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTINA KANONDEBIT ART. THANKS TO: AZZI GLASSER, CAZZ KENZIE, JOE McLAREN, ROJA DOVE (ROJADOVE.COM), STOCKISTS: BOUCHERON (BOJARODS.COM), CACHAREL (BOOTS.COM), CALVIN KLEIN (THEPERFUMESHOP.COM), CARVEN (DEBENHAMS.COM), CHANEL (SELFRIDGES.COM), DIOR (HOUSEOFFRASER.CO.UK), FREDERIC MALLE (LIBERTY.CO.UK), GUERLAIN (JOHNLEWIS.COM), ISSEY MIYAKE (FEELUNIQUE.COM), JEAN-PAUL GAULTIER (ESSENTIAL.COM), LANCÔME (DEBENHAMS.COM), MAISON FRANCIS KURKDIAN (SELFRIDGES.COM), SERGE LUTENS (LIBERTY.CO.UK), TOM FORD (HOUSEOFFRASER.CO.UK)

🌀 issue at the Saatchi Gallery, my phone raged non-stop before becoming a messenger of the cruellest kind. James had been hit by a car less than 500 metres from my home in Wales; he was killed instantly. In a fleeting moment, I'd lost the person who'd defined so much of my life; the person who helped me choose my university, who convinced me I was smart despite my caustically low teenage self-esteem and told me I was just as beautiful without the piercings and rainbow-coloured hair as I was with them. That nanosecond of pain was unforgettable; it should be bottled, purified and given as a form of punishment to the vilest of villains. I felt like every organ in my body was slowly starting to putrefy inside me as the world drained of its justice and meaning.

It has been over a year since that day but the weight of losing James still bears down on my chest like a colossus. It's not until somebody you love passes away that you realise how entwined they are with your neurological being. 'Things' aren't the same anymore. Flannel shirts and certain band T-shirts make me think of him, and if any Pearl Jam songs play on the office radio, I have to go outside and take a moment. Other facets of my life have subconsciously evolved too; since his death, my once-cherished gregarious power scents sit relegated on a display shelf, like tarnished, once-adored religious icons. My heart just can't relate to their asphyxiating heaviness any more. They smother me, like a velvet cloak in the arid desert heat and the very hint of their syrupy-sweetness catches the back of my throat, flicking a switch in my brain that says, "these heavy scents aren't you any more." I've got all the confidence I need now, and so much of that I owe to his unending belief in me. Now, I want something that complements and blends with my inner essence, not something that masks it. Something I don't need to hide behind. "When you've been through a life-changing event, you don't always want scents around that are reminiscent of the past," Dove

explains. "Many women change their entire fragrance preferences after break-ups, divorce and menopause – anything that's a big milestone in their life." For me, the bold statement I used to make with my fragrance isn't the statement I want or need to make anymore.

### SOLACE IN SCENT

The only thing that does inspire a sense of peace now, post-James, is the smell of skin. Not necessarily *his* smell or any kind of falsified 'clean' scent, just the smell of salty, honeyed, musky skin – like nature heightened and taken to the next level. It's half a spritz of Carnal Flower, £145, Frédéric Malle, a scent that invokes the smell of his rolled cigarettes during the balmy summer of 2005, or the hope that the exotic allure of Le Parfum, £38, Carven will transport me away to somewhere he *could* maybe be. Immediately after the accident I found myself wearing these fragrances to bed to provide midnight reassurance – it seems to be the time your mind wants to race to needlessly distressing places. "Scent can absolutely act as a form of therapy, connecting to your moods and feelings via the limbic system," explains perfumer Azzi Glasser. "That's why children often sniff their teddies and blankets; certain smells bring us comfort." Being enveloped in scent is a cognitive and fragrant hug of the most cushioning kind.

It's ironic, and heartbreaking, that I'm writing this in memory of the man who published my first piece of writing, but surrounding myself with scents like Aqua Vitae reminds me of how pure-hearted James was, and starts to shed a flickering light upon that irretrievable sadness. It's the *only* thing that even attempts to eliminate an unrelenting and unmerciful loss, and for that, scent should be both rewarded and recognised as a uniquely powerful healing entity. It's the only thing that anchors us both now, between two very distant worlds. 🌀

**In memory of James Kinloch McLaren, 1978-2012**

## MOOD-EVOKING SCENTS

### SANDALWOOD

This ancient woody note mimics the hormones produced by breastfeeding mothers, evoking feelings



of wellbeing. It's found in Black Orchid Hydrating Emulsion, £35, Tom Ford, which has a light, vanilla identity.

### WHITE FLOWERS

Jasmine and ylang ylang imitate the sex hormone indole, linking us to sensual thoughts. This note features in the elegant Place Vendôme, £50, Boucheron.



### VANILLA

A rich ice-cream scent that can provide warmth and happiness. Baiser Volé Essence De Parfum, £69, Cartier, contains bourbon vanilla that sweetens on skin as the day rolls on.



### VIOLET

Traditional tones of violet and orris evoke a sense of Victorian nostalgia. Bois De Violette, £105, Serge Lutens, is notably striking.

