

IN SEARCH
of
PERFUMES

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PROLOGUE

The world's harvesters

Perfumes are at once familiar to us, yet mysterious. They summon up fragments from the recesses of our olfactory memory, snatches of childhood recollections, as vivid as they are distant. There is no escaping it. Everybody carries with them through life a waft of lilac, a country lane lined with broom, the scent of loved ones. I clearly remember a moment I experienced as a child in the woods. It was May, and there was such a profusion of lily of the valley beneath the great oaks of the Rambouillet forest that the air was heavy with fragrance. I was spellbound, troubled by this scent that conjured up images of my mother wearing that sumptuous perfume, Diorissimo, a homage to those little white bells. A sense of intimate familiarity from the interplay of smell and memory, coupled with the mysteriously evocative power wielded by a composition when a flacon of scent is opened. Perfume is reassuring

at first, as it reminds us of who we are, then captivating, as its own story is revealed.

Here are fruits, flowers, leaves and branches . . . Verlaine's familiar verse is a lyrical introduction to nature's own vast catalogue of scents. Let me expand: here, also, are roots, peels, woods, lichens, seeds, buds, berries, balsams and resins. The plant world, in all its guises, is the wellspring of the essences and extracts that have given us perfumery. Before the development in the nineteenth century of the chemistry of odorant molecules, natural products had for three millennia been the sole materials used in perfumes. While they have come to symbolise luxury in the industry, perfumers remain resolutely enamoured with these natural scents. They bring a richness and complexity to their creations; indeed, some are perfumes in their own right.

Before evaporating on our skin, the formulae take only a moment to tell the tangled stories of their numerous component parts. Tales of laboratories, in the case of chemical ingredients, and of flowers, spices and resins for natural products. Distilled or extracted, these plants are transformed into essential oils, absolutes or resinoids,* to become part of a perfume's composition, taking their place alongside synthetic molecules. The olfactory depth of natural ingredients renders them indispensable in fine fragrances, and they always feature prominently in the marketing materials of perfume houses.

Essences tell their own story, the result of a coincidence of regions, landscapes, soils and climates, and the work of people who may have deep roots in that terroir or who may simply be

* The glossary at the end of the book contains definitions of technical terms.

passing through. The fragrance industry has always needed – and will continue to need – woodcutters for its aromatic woods such as cedar, oud and sandalwood. It still needs people to gather the plants that grow wild: the juniper berries, cistus branches and tonka beans. Collectors of saps and resins tapping trees for frankincense, benzoin and Peru balsam. Growers of flowers, leaves and roots, such as rose and jasmine, vetiver and patchouli. People to press citrus fruits such as bergamot and lemons. Carriers and merchants, successors to the caravaneers of Arabia and the mariners who linked India to Mediterranean lands. And, finally, distillers: the masters of rose water, alchemists of essences dating back to the seventeenth century – extractors, and chemists in the modern age. A community both disparate and dispersed, harvesting in deserts and forests, labouring with hoes and tractors, conducting deals that may be clandestine or transparent, unaware perhaps of their products' final destination, or, then again, receiving visits to their fields from renowned perfumers and representatives of the most distinguished houses.

It is a diverse world that has resulted, unwittingly, in a grand, historical community, creating a tapestry whose warp and weft tell us tales of lavender, rose and frankincense. Enigmatic itineraries, shifting origins, traditions that have been safeguarded, misplaced, lost and rediscovered; these are the stories of the making of perfumes, their creators all nourishing our enduring passion for nature's scents. When a Malagasy farmer pollinates a flower on her vanilla plant, there is a form of magic at play. It is an action she must repeat a thousand times over in order for the pods to form, to ripen, before they can be harvested, extracted and

ultimately transformed into the delicious aroma of a little vial of vanilla absolute.

This book is an account of three decades of wandering, on the hunt for the source of the world's scents. Neither a chemist nor a botanist, I went to work in the perfume industry after studying business administration, thereby indulging an abiding interest in trees and plants. It was a journey prompted by appreciation and curiosity, a journey that developed into a passion, and for the last thirty years I have devoted myself to searching for, discovering, purchasing and, from time to time, producing essences for the fragrance industry. Whether it be in fields of roses or patchouli, in the forests of Venezuela or the villages of Laos, I have been initiated into a universe of scent by the people of these perfumed lands. They have taught me to listen to the stories told by the essences and extracts when their flacons are opened, and I have become what these days might be described as a “sourceror” or sourcing agent.

I work for a company that specialises in creating fragrances and flavours, and my role is to ensure that our perfumers are supplied with essences or extracts from more than one hundred and fifty natural raw materials from about fifty countries. My job involves securing consistent volume and quality, but I am also constantly on the hunt for new ingredients to extend the perfumers' “palettes”. I am the first link in the organisational chain of this industry that stretches from fields of flowers to the flacons in a perfumery. The final protagonists in this story are the perfume houses themselves, and with the launch of every new product, perfumers from the various creative companies – the famous

“noses”, creators of complex and confidential formulae known as “juices” – are pitted against each other. The community of perfumers, a florilegium of talent and forceful personalities, is always conjuring up new scents for the most prestigious labels and that is where my experience in the field comes in.

My travels in perfume first started when I was working for a family-owned company based in the heart of the Landes forest. I became involved in setting up distillation and extraction facilities in countries where some of the major aromatic products are grown. A pioneer in its field in the 1980s, this company had pursued a policy of establishing facilities at source to produce natural extracts. Be it in Spain, Morocco, Bulgaria, Turkey or Madagascar, this involved installing equipment, organising the cultivation and harvesting of crops, and managing production teams. I discovered places steeped in history, processes based on traditional know-how in danger of disappearing, and complex webs of human relationships.

For the last ten years, I have worked as a sourcing agent for a Swiss company, also family-owned, and one of the major global businesses involved in manufacturing fragrances and flavours. In order to supply and expand the catalogue of natural ingredients available to our perfumers, over the years I have helped develop with producers from around the world a network of partnerships that has allowed me to rub shoulders with people in every sector of the perfume industry. My passion for fragrances has been enhanced by every one of these encounters.

The geography of our products brings a sourcing agent face to face with a mosaic of social, economic and political realities.

I have worked with numerous communities, many of them remote, vulnerable to the risk of cyclones and droughts, abandoned even by their own governments. Very early on, I became aware of our industry's role and responsibilities in the fate and future of these populations. It is a responsibility that both motivates me and guides the way I approach my work.

The inspiration for this book sprang from a recent trip, when I found myself standing next to a frankincense tree in the mountains of Somaliland. The collector who was accompanying me had just made an incision in the trunk, causing small milky drops to start to bead. Along with the intoxicating smell of the emerging frankincense, the wind carried with it a feeling of witnessing, at that very moment, the continuation of an extraordinary story, the story of the harvesting of nature's perfumes, a story that had persisted uninterrupted for more than three thousand years. Breathing in the scent of the fresh resin brought back memories from years earlier of my experience in the cistus, or rock rose, fields of Andalucía. I realised with a start that, from labdanum cistus to frankincense, I had had the good fortune over the previous thirty years to meet the heirs to this story that had endured for thousands of years. I knew then what I wanted to write: an account of perfume's source materials throughout the ages, the story of the lives of those who continue to devote themselves to their production, an account which would reflect the scope of their knowledge and traditions, the beauty of the places where they produce their scents, and the fragility of their future. Each stage of this story is different and unique, but there is a common thread: every element is part of a process to produce fragrances

that move us profoundly. What better illustration of this than a fact I discovered in Bulgaria's Valley of Roses? In order to produce one kilogram of rose oil, one million flowers must be picked, by hand.

This book is my homage to the harvesters of the world.