

WRITERS MOSAIC

Perfume

Derek Owusu

The scent of time

The first perfume I remember smelling was Elizabeth Arden's *Red Door*. I'd always tag along with my mum – to church, to aunts, to parties, to prayer all nights – and in every one of them places, there was the smell. I actually associated it with Ghanaians. I thought that was just how they smelled. I remember the bottle, too – in the shape of a door, obviously, with a red top and see-through bottle. It must have been quite, erm, inexpensive if almost all the working-class Ghanaian immigrants were wearing it. Through every season, it seemed. I actually offered to buy my mum a bottle recently and she was insulted, telling me how out of fashion it was and anyway, she said, do they even sell it anymore? They do. Anyway, I can recognise the ingredients in other perfumes that I have. The notes that stayed with me, between base, mid and top – rose, honey, amber, orange blossom. But likely I'll get a bottle when I move out. A way to remember my mum, walking over to my chest of drawers to have a smell every time I miss her. You know what it is, perfumes are memories in a bottle. And as people, collecting memories is what we do best. It's what we are, collectively. Although it's becoming a little more expensive for me.

So that's my mum. My dad now, his scent back then was a lot harsher. Like him, of course I'd say; but when I reached secondary school, I'd grab his fragrance before my mother's ones. Thinking back, I wonder what the other kids said about me when I wasn't there. My 'smell' no doubt still lingering and pissing them off. An eleven-year-old smelling like a fifty-year-old man. And that's definitely what Yves Saint Laurent's *Kouros* smelled like. Even to this day. I don't have a bottle but the scent was so strong it still clings to my dad's skin. I'm not joking. A white

bottle with no lid. Even the atomiser was louder and more aggressive than the other perfumes around the house. My dad would open his shirt button before going to work, spray twice on his hairless chest, one or two more on his neck, then one on his Jheri curl. Five sprays. As an 11-year-old, that would be a lot. I probably irritated my teachers with that fragrance, too. So, this scent isn't one I remember fondly, but the notes that hit when I think of it – bergamot, cinnamon and clove. Clove in perfume, you know. Amazing.

Then I moved on to those cheap ones my mum would buy from any shop. They were horrible, I even remember at the time I didn't like them; but I thought the point was that other people would. So I threw them all over me. There's one in particular that was so cloying and suffocating, I remember getting a headache every time I used it, but that didn't stop me, especially when I knew the girls around my area were playing out. I should have known they'd have no interest in a boy who smelled like their mum. And I can't even imagine the waft that was coming off me in summer! See, now I know what scents should be worn and when. Heavier scents – sweet, oud-y, leathery, amberish, earthy notes – for winter. And lighter ones – citrus, vetiver, fruity, soapy – for summer. Fewer sprays when the sun's out, more when it's cold, or, sometimes, night-time. And another quick tip – never rub in the fragrance when you've sprayed it. It creates heat that alters the 'DNA' of the scent, it won't reach its full potential. Everyone does it, I know. One day, I'll google why. But yeah, when you spray, let it set and be on your way. Also, spray on the skin, don't put three shots into the air then shimmy into it! I did this for so long. Mostly because the cheap perfume I was stealing from my mum was giving me a rash on my neck. But yeah, to get the best out of it, apply it, don't dance with it.

I can't even remember what I was wearing in my teens, like 15 years plus. Probably nothing. And this is when I became serious about the gym as well. So, actually, it was probably just the smell of Lynx that followed me around. Actually, yes, I remember loving Lynx *Vice* and *Dark Temptation*. That's all I'd shower with. Those were decent smells! Of course, you'd know they were Lynx, but back at that age, wearing them was fine. No judgement. Random, but I remember thinking Axe deodorant was the fake version of Lynx, and I refused to wear it. I went to New York to take part in this thing called Camp America and someone saw my Lynx bottle and held it up saying, 'Look at this fake-ass Axe.' Yeah, to walk past anyone wearing Lynx instantly

takes me back to the gym showers, feeling so good after a workout, thinking one-two bench presses have made you tox. Good times, boy. I actually think that's one of the more powerful nostalgic scents. Well, not one, but the obvious Lynx scents – *Africa*, *Dark Temptation*, *Vice*, *Voodoo* and *Phoenix*. Scents that make me feel strong again.

It's actually the gym where bottled perfumes came back for me as well. This is how it started. I was on the Piccadilly tube back from work and someone had left a Selfridges bag next to me. I had my headphones in so had no idea where they got off. So I looked inside, saw a box and took it with me when I got off at Turnpike Lane. The box was *Bleu de Chanel*, and it was the first bottle of perfume I actually owned. I mean, kind of owned. I feel guilty now but at the time I just thought, how am I going to return this to the person? So I kept it. And it was amazing. Heavenly. Another level to the stuff I had got used to. I actually had people complimenting me. One of my colleagues saw it, grabbed it, so excited, and sprayed it all over her body. I swear, I feel like I became the favourite fitness instructor overnight. Then, I lost it. I left it in my bag, left the bag in the staff kitchen that was filthy and due to be cleaned, and anything inside thrown away, according to the sign on the door, and I never saw it again. I was more annoyed I lost all my exercise notes than the perfume, probably because I never paid for it and I felt instinctively that the universe was claiming back something I had taken without permission. Something like that, anyway. But that was the start of an expensive fascination with perfumes. I have a bottle of *Bleu de Chanel* now, the Parfum version, which is closest to the original formulation. Another side note: there is a community of perfume-lovers called the 'fragrance community' or 'frag heads', who blog, upload YouTube vids and interact in chats. And among them there are what I would call conspiracy theories about reformulated fragrances, removed ingredients, difference in perfume batches, etc. I think loads of these are rubbish, just basically a way for people to say, 'I've got a version of this that you haven't and can never get, blah blah'; but with the Chanel, yeah, it's true. No idea why, but whenever I smell it now, it reminds me of Italy. So weird, but it brings to mind E. M. Forster and my Pilates instructor back then, who was from Sardinia.

From this point on, I bought fragrances based on talking to people about what I was wearing and them telling me what their favourite scents were. A lot of recommendations I couldn't afford, though. *Black Orchid*, I think, was the most expensive one I bought. Man, when I sam-

pled that in Selfridges, I couldn't believe it. It was like sex in a bottle. That same day I sampled *Tobacco Vanille*, also by Tom Ford, but *Vanille* was too expensive. I think it was £300, and that was way too outrageous a price. At the time, at least. Still kinda is now, if I'm honest, but I gotta style on people. With *Black Orchid*, though, I think I went over the top, wearing it all the time, so many sprays – this was before I learnt how and when to apply. It was definitely cloying to people around me, because I'd always be asked why I liked it so much – code, I think now, for why you wearing so much of it? But I didn't care. I liked it so I was going to pile it on. This was around the time I started dating seriously, so when whenever I catch it on a stranger, I stop for a minute and am taken back to the person I was dating for the longest period of time while I was wearing it. The memorable notes – truffle, Mexican chocolate and vanilla. A unisex fragrance, and this is when I realised that I'm not really feeling those strong 'male' scents. I don't have a bottle currently, but I love smelling it on other people, memories intruding into my commutes or bar stool conversations.

And then we arrive at where I'm at now. I think I own about 60 different fragrances. When I'm down, I open up one of my vanity cases, remove a lid (the majority of my perfumes have lids now, probably because of the overpowering readiness of *Kouros* sprayed), I put my nose to the atomizer and take in the smell of... some time, some feeling, some place, some person, or all of it, and feel at ease. My favourite fragrance houses? Kilian Paris, Parfums de Marly, Tom Ford private blends, Dior, and Roja Parfums. All outside my tax bracket but I struggle to walk away from a beautiful scent. Food can come later. My favourite notes – honey, amber, iris, vanilla and cacao. Sometimes, I actually think, what would my favourite fictional, or most memorable, characters wear? And then, yes, I do do this: depending what I'm re-reading, after a shower (with fragranceless soap) I'd apply it, maybe do one-two sprays on the pages. Or just use something from the fragrance house if I don't have the actual perfume. So, *Gatsby*, I say would be a Penhaligon's man. Probably *Halfeti*. Kundera's Tomáš, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* – Dior *Eau Sauvage*; Atticus Finch, defo some *Old Spice*; Darren from Robyn Travis's *Mama Can't Raise No Man* – Paco Rabanne *1 Million*, no doubt; Daisy Buchanan from *The Great Gatsby* – *Love, Don't Be Shy*; J.D. Salinger's Zooey, something with oud in it, maybe Montale's *Black Aoud*; Charles Bukowski's literary alter ego, Henry Chinaski – *Tobacco Vanille*; and Chinua

Achebe's Okonkwo, *Kouros*!

My passion for perfume runs parallel with my passion for prose. An obsession, maybe, as I can't go a day without reading at least a chapter or popping the top of one of my favourite fragrance. Nostalgia is mixed up in our treasured novels (often becoming a treasure while we're in the process of reading), and we can recall where we were when we turned the final page, felt the most poignant moment in the narrative, realised that without us, me, you, the author's dialogue wouldn't be complete. And I believe this is the same with scents. If there was one aroma I wished to be remembered by, or hoped that K, the main character in my novel *That Reminds Me*, would be remembered by, it would be *Black Phantom* by Kilian Paris. Memorable notes: rum, dark chocolate, coffee and caramel.

Derek Owusu

to add: short biography.

This is a version of a talk given by Derek Owusu. The recording can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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