Luxury

Kevin Canty
KENNY IS WALKING DOWN A STREET, a street in Paris, actually, down a crooked crowded tourist street, walking past a loose three or four American women sauntering in black when — three thousand miles from home, and twenty years later — he smells Jean’s perfume again.

Alert, suddenly. The small hairs on his arms stand erect. A picture of her face forms in his mind, the soft skin of her back, the touch. He slows his stride to fall in behind them but he is noticed. The trailing woman looks sharply up at him, a dark angry knot of a face. He has been warned. Still he edges and idles behind them, hoping for another whiff among the morning smells of this tourist street, bakery, sour water, coffee. Which one of these women is wearing it? Four of them together, Kenny’s age, from Boston or San Francisco by their clothes. Not Cleveland, anyway. He doesn’t care if they notice. He looks carefully at each of their faces — a mother, a rich and beautiful, a Georgia-looking blond with coppery streaks in her hair — to see if Jean has become one of them. Of course of course none of these women is her. Still he follows until they stop at a shop window full of luxury leather and Kenny must either ask them or move along.

Why would it matter, to know the name of this perfume? But it matters, it does, and Kenny calls himself a coward as he walks away. How hard would it be to walk up to them and ask politely: That perfume you’re wearing, a person I know used to wear it. Would you mind? Could I bother you? But then he pictures himself sniffing from one to the next like a curious dog, to sniff out which one is wearing it — tries to imagine any sane woman consenting to this, can’t.

This isn’t the first time. Maybe the seventh.

He keeps walking, dividing the crowds. He has an appointment with his wife — she’s here on business, Kenny’s along for company — but not for forty-five minutes, and nothing in particular between now and then. He had been looking for a
cafe, he remembers now, some agreeable place in which to read the *International Herald Tribune*. But that was before, he thinks. It feels like a long time ago now.

The trouble with perfume, he thinks, is that there's no language for it, or at least none that he knows. Somebody knows. But for Kenny, there's not even a real relation between the name and the thing named, he's thought for years that this would turn out to be some name he's known since childhood, Shalimar or Chanel or My Sin, by Lanvin (he can hear the television announcer's voice from deep childhood: *My Sin, by Lanvin . . .*). What does "L'air du Temps" smell like? and how would Kenny know? On the other hand, it can't be anything too popular. Seven — now eight — encounters in twenty years, fewer than one every two years. He may be forgetting one or two. Now it's gone again, he thinks, gone again.

Kenny closes his eyes, trying to shut out the noise and concentrate, trying to bring the perfume back. Not exactly roses but almost roses, and then something else, something dark . . . Instead he gets the touch of Jean's hand: cool, precise fingers. They stayed up all night talking and then they ran out of things to say and then that moment, where something is about to happen and there's nothing to say. The way she looked into his face, cool, evaluating. Before she could decide about him, he reached out and touched the bare skin of her forearm and they both looked down, contemplating the look of this: hand on smooth skin, connection. When she looked up, Kenny kissed her, which — he knew — was what she wanted, what she expected.

That's it: he knew. What happened to that? that sexual ESP, that simply knowing, the words unsaid. Gone gone gone.

And waking in her bed at noon, sunlight, and there was her perfume in the sheets.

Kenny sees that he is on a bridge with a crowd of other people, stopping at the red lights, walking with the green. The bridge has a name, which doesn't seem important to remember. Rive gauche, rive droit. He follows the crowd, wherever they are going, in the spring sunlight. It's March, the leaves are budding out on the trees. The shadows are open and wintry.

It's possible her perfume was French, he thinks, Parisian
— her father had been in the State Department, she had lived in Athens, Barcelona, elsewhere, growing up. She dressed in silks and scarves and real shoes, with heels. She had a dry look, ready to be amused. She was habitually quiet and lived alone. She was loved by her professors. Jean: he assembles her out of facts. Really it's just a colored cloud of feeling, more than he can name.

She was not the love of his life.

She is still present in him, though, a little undissolved lump of regret, mostly asleep or inert but sometimes — as now — springing into movement, the things he did and didn't do. The way that he could simply touch her arm, the way he could bring her almost to come just by kissing her hand, the inside of her hand, tracing the soft lines with his tongue while she shivered next to him on the bed, with her dress on. The power of that, and at the same time the danger: she was not simply there for his pleasure. She wanted something from him. She was teaching him something, the impulsive impatient inconsiderate boy. The way she'd shake and moan and curl around him if he was doing right, like a leaf, he thinks, the bud uncurling. My luxury, she called him. My little luxury.

The night she sent him away, because he had been hiking in the woods all afternoon in the sun and had come straight to her room and he smelled, she said. Go home and take a shower. And then while he was in the shower, in his own apartment, he heard the door open from the hallway and he knew it was her. He hurried through the rest of the shower and came out and she was gone again, the wreckage of his apartment being too much for her. That was a night he was angry with her. He is still angry with her. The fact that she was right, he was wrong, has nothing to do with it.

Standing empty-handed on the bridge while the others pass by. He leans against the stone wall and looks over the edge, like he is looking at the water. Anybody passing by would think so. This having to qualify for sex, he thinks, this owing something to her.... And yet it was worth it, completely, the delicate flush that would rise from her chest to her throat, he can still feel the hot damp skin in his empty hands. Slowly, gently. This was Jean's world, not Kenny's, but he left it reluctantly, bicycling
home at three in the morning, going to sleep alone with the smell of Jean's perfume on his skin.

In his little bed, alone.

Kenny looks at his hands. Then stands up, inserts himself into the shuffle, follows the sidewalk the rest of the way across the river. This is all history here, the bridge he walks on, the island, the city. At the end of the bridge is a department store, which is not history. A relief. A klezmer band is playing on the sidewalk, clarinet, accordion and guitar, a music with intelligence but no sex. The crowd walks by, dropping a coin sometimes. Kenny stands and listens to them for a moment.

Then Kenny turns and looks through the glass doors of the department store and feels a little shiver, almost fright; because there, just inside the door, is the perfume department itself! He can see the beautiful clerks behind their counters, the thousands of bottles and tiny boxes. He feels a shiver, he doesn't know why. Somewhere in there is Jean's perfume. Not that, he thinks.

But of course he knows, he's known it since the first moment he picked it up on the street: the night he stopped by her house on the way home from the library, stopped by without announcement at ten-thirty at night, and saw neither light nor darkness but candle-light in her windows. Jean had lovers, he was only one of them, that was true from the start, but he had just been thinking about her hands, it's why he left the library, the way she fluttered and shook on the bed next to him while he traced the lifeline with his hand, the lines for marriage and for luck. The way she came with her dress still on.

Kenny alone in bed that night, thinking it's all for me, it's all supposed to be for me. She was fucking giving it away and it was his. And this: a week later, he hadn't gone to her house or picked up the phone, Kenny is studying at the kitchen table when he hears the downstairs door slam and he knows it's her. He turns the light out, though it is still mostly light, seven-thirty in the evening, and he sits there in the gray ghost light of the kitchen and listens to her knock on the door. He knows it's her. She's knows he's in there; his bicycle is chained to the fence outside. He sits at the table thinking, this is what my father would do,
this is exactly what my father would do. All Kenny has to do is stand up and walk over to the door and let her into the apartment, which is now quite clean, he hasn’t had anything else to do this last week. All he has to do is let her in, and there will be wine and sex and somebody to talk to. And he wants this, he knows it. He wants what Jean has got, and she’s ready to give it to him. But this hot little boil of anger won’t let him move. He sits there, trying not to breathe, while she knocks for the third time and then — without giving him time to answer — turns and down the stairs and out into the street again. By then Kenny is at the window, watching Jean in her Spring dress walk away, down the sidewalk, carrying under her arm the bottle of wine in its paper bag.

He has done so much to be forgiven for.

My wife, he thinks. He tips a coin into the open violin case and steps inside, through the glass doors and into the thousand different scents, spicy and floral, citrus and cinnamon, wood and ivy and rot and roses, to look for a little something for his wife.