

Parfum

Rochelle Potkar (<https://rochellepotkar.com/>)

Pedder Road, Mumbai

As a child Russi was affected by garlic and onion smells from his mother's kitchen, wood and floor polish from his home, chalk and ink from his classroom, his classmates' lunchboxes, his grandmother's lap of sweat and urine, and by his house servant's vegetable-dyed clothes, hair oil, and talcum. In fact, Russi was so moved by smells that he didn't think it was unusual.

Soon smells had names and associations. Like a nose bleed - heady and thick like a swim through a chlorinated pool, the dankness in a cinema hall like the smell of lost innocence, exhaust fumes from a BEST bus like the fear of not completing school homework, or the smell of rain on the streets like a hooker's armpit he had once seen at Kamathipura bus stop.

Russi marked his girlfriends too based on their smells. He knew exactly whom he would date – the limey-, grassy-, fruity-, dewy-, rosy-smelling ones not the foody- or sour-apple- smelling ones. He gifted each of them half-used perfume bottles from his mother's dressing table: Chanel, Dior, Coty, Rochas, and asked them to remember them all. By now Russi's memory of them was never lost to time and count them all.

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After college, Russi got into the perfume business. His shop was a 4 feet x 4 feet booth on Pedder Road. His father had invested most of his post-retirement, bank-employee savings into this kiosk -- in the most expensive part of Bombay. Russi imported vials from Dubai and Turkey, and sold them for double the price by this lane that faced Jaslok Hospital on one side and a crossroad of cars and buses screeching off gravel on the other.

Amidst this crumbling of dirt into air, dust with sea-winds, an island of better smells is all the more necessary, thought Russi, sitting atop his high stool in the kiosk of *Russi's Perfumes*.

He made good profits and by every humble standard, was getting richer.

But that was not Russi's goal.

He wanted to make perfumes. Those smells that had no names had to be categorized and capitalized upon. They needed to be sensed from the depths of one's nose, under the pink of one's eyelids, dreamt up, and explored. He wanted to capture them like a musician composed tones between staves, a writer scribbled on tissue paper in an Irani restaurant, a painter worked on his canvases as if at gun-point.