

# Parfum

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## *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 which ones they liked. Once smells were associated with a girl, they were never lost to memory. By now Russi had 5000 smells in his head, if only one could shear open his brain 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.

Every morning Russi left his shop to go to the Marine Drive bay and watch the sunrise hitting the promenade – this smell of pink he wished for. He rode the trains and buses to Grant Road – this smell of hard work on grab rails he wished against. The flight of flamingos at the Sewri mudflats – this smell of water flapping and drying in the wind, he wanted.

Russi would walk past secondhand booksellers at Flora Fountain. The way they screamed around their wares in *humid passion* – that’s what he wanted. The traffic that slowed at the signals – *gruffness on pebble – this texture*- the feeling of mud in his mouth - *that too* he wanted... *as an end note*. Light dappling on the hurried workforce at Churchgate station, past the patient shopkeepers and slow beggars, reminding Russi of the garden swing of his childhood – this ebb and flow of seller-purchaser, glacier-river, he wanted.

What he didn’t want was the smell of fish, fever, sea, but first rains on earth, or a fistful of wet sea sand.

Then he met Marinette.

She was the embodiment of every smell Russi had liked - the garden of his childhood, the pubs of adolescence, the odour of overripe apples from his granny’s kitchen, his mother’s Sunday jasmine perfume sprayed before a visit to the fire temple, and his dog Ruffus’ musk on the day he mated.

Russi had to marry Marinette - the person who completed him with her smells. She was his biography. He would never have committed to any young *thing* so soon, but he couldn’t afford for Marinette to go away. He had to see, rather smell her every day. If he met other girls, they reminded him of the dread in subways, sweaty crowds in buses, musty smells in long-haul airplane cabins.

No, Marinette was the woman for him.

She was 21, and they had not hit it off well. She always worried about her nails, be it in the opulent Taj or colonial-styled Tea Centre. If not she would be worried if the flowers on her bangles matched those on her dresses. She was half-French, half-Parsi-Indian and beautiful, but she had to halt and peer into every glass door or showroom window, or fumble for a mirror from her bag. She cat-walked in high heels, and Russi always felt all the more shorter.

He made it up by taking her to Nashik because it smelt of full-bodied grapes before they were crushed into rose-red wines, or Panchgani, where the air was thick with the pulp of strawberries, Matheran, that brimmed with the piquant of *jhambul* trees and red-earth quiet, or Dehradun for the coolness of snow-crushing melting mountains, Goa, where the sand underfoot dissolved like caramelized *bebinca* into the mouth.

Yet he couldn’t get any closer. He smelt failure, and it was rust in rain, outdone soggy skin under a worn out band-aid, the rustle of leaves scraping against his eardrum.

Yet, Russi pursued her. No way was he going to allow Marinette’s smells to disappear from his life now that he had known them.

Finally she relented, and they married. Women seemed to like perseverance.

They made love, and Russi had more of her smells. They slept besides each other on the eternity of their bed and he had his childhood, his adolescence, his late-night weed-and-LSD psychedelia, the smells of his first internship and first sexual experience - all under one roof, in the one-stop shop of Marinette's body.

She was a wife as aromatic as the tea she served, as piquant as the house she kept.

She dressed in pastel chiffons, high collared with glimmering buttons from neck to bosom, hair plaited on each side or rolled into buns. Marinette loved wearing glittering broaches and had an array of hats and scarves.

She let Russi be.

In fact, she gave him so much of space, it drew him back to her. She would walk around the house nimbly, as if it were made of glass. She wasn't talkative - a little lost in her concerns over chipped crockery cups, or matching the upholstery to the curtains, or shopping for fresheners for rooms and their car.

Many-a-times, Russi would come home from his day's work to find Marinette on her fours, her taut bottom wagging as it faced him, she scrubbing invisible marks off their marble floors.

Now settled into a year-long marriage, Russi veered close enough to tear open the invisible veils around Marinette, and ask after her blossoms. One by one, she told him, and he took furious mental notes.

He then researched and ordered those scents from Kuwait and Bahrain, and spent the rest of the days inhaling those vials before they vanished into the grooves and pores of Marinette's skin.

But nostril over nozzle, nostril over nozzle, when he searched for the same scents on Marinette's skin and was back over the bottles, they didn't smell like her.

*So perfume wasn't always responsible, thought Russi. It was topical.*

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"What do you eat?" he asked her next, when quiet moments began dawning in their conversation, just like the silences that percolated everywhere in their marriage.

"Well, all kinds of foods. All kinds." She shrugged.

"Anything in particular?"

"What are you getting at, Russ? Why do you keep asking me this?"

He hung his head. *Yes, that was not how one spoke to a lady. But wasn't that how one spoke to a wife?*

"I believe, Marin," he finally said, "that the spice one intakes, bleeds through the cells and pores."

"Is it?" She lifted her arms, sniffing her armpits, then said, "Do I smell bad?" She winked.

Before he could defend his point, she answered, "Cinnamon, garlic *papadum*. I eat butter chicken, sometimes pork roast, mutton stew, but I love cinnamon. A lot! Now? Are you happy?"

"That explains it!" he said and slapped his palms onto the table. The cutlery clattered. "It's the cinnamon in your skin!"

She grazed her nose over her hand as if kissing herself. She looked so feminine, listening to the heartbeat of her own beauty, her own shell and cover.

"But I don't smell like cinnamon at all," she shook her head and stared at him. "You're strange, Russ. But I like it somehow." She smiled at him in a way that made her face lopsided.

*When she wasn't animated, she looked stunning*, thought Russi. But the moment she spoke or smiled, her beauty broke into an asymmetry of crooked teeth, deep crinkles around one eye, but not the other.

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Every day, Russi continued with his joyful decamping. He would wander off from his kiosk, foraging the city until his lungs brimmed with smells of the morning.

One evening, when he reached home, his father was waiting like a smoking volcano, fused into place only by a deliberate attempt to stay calm. One look at the old man, and Russi could smell his anger about to burst from his wrinkled throat, perhaps making debris of his old bones on the way.

His father's low rumble began along with the rocking of his chair. "No wonder perfumes from our shop have been disappearing!! You're never there! Good thing they robbed only a few bottles! What if somebody sold all of it, and vanished with the money? Huh? You wouldn't even know. What's wrong with you, Russi? You have a wife to feed, a house to maintain, a family to raise, a business to grow. Where do you disappear every morning leaving the shop open like a bloody yawn - *gaand* of a whore?"

Russi swallowed into his dry throat, adjusting his spectacles.

"At least, tell your father and he can take over. Now after retirement all his time is spent worrying about you and your future. He might as well sit in your shop and mind it for you!"

"Pappa, I want to start a factory... a... a scent-producing one. A workshop where... I... we can make perfumes. Try and test at least as many before selling them," said Russi. "I'm... I'm tired of these imported labels."

"*Arrey dikhra!* Don't talk like a baby. From where will we get the money for all this? We don't have a lottery or something."

"We don't need one," Russi knelt before his father. "You mind the shop. Let me produce the essences. I want to try new ones. So many new ones... we can soon sell our own and... and... for much less."

His father looked at him, as though he was a lifeless exhibit in a museum, and would have wanted to move on.

"Father, no please wait and think."

“Do you have everything in place?” the old man asked, “Where will this factory be? How long will it take to make perfumes? How much of the shop’s money will go into this? What if it fails?”

Russi massaged his father’s reed-thin knees. “Thank you. Thank you. Everything has been worked out. I have it all in here and here.” Russi tapped his head and his nose, and then his small brown leather-bound notebook that fell to the floor.

As the pages flipped, his father saw doodles, scribbles, random words, and numbers. A frown gathered over his old face, and he looked at Russi, hoping he was not sick.

Long ago, an old aunt had *delusia*: she could see things, but they had never taken her to the doctor.

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Marinette didn’t like the idea of a factory. “Wouldn’t it be dirty?”

“We’re not starting with a tin shed,” said Russi, “I just said that to Pappa to make it look big. It’s going to be a small laboratory.”

Marinette raised her eyebrows. “Wouldn’t that stink?”

“Not a chemistry lab, it would be but a small room of smells. Sweet smells.”

“Say that then!” She marched about, rearranging curios.

“Pappa would find that too small of me. So...”

“Ah!” Marinette shook her head, but did not let her perfect face break into a lop-sided smile. *That isn’t a good sign*, thought Russi.

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After a few weeks of cajoling both his father and Marinette, Russi took up the front room of their house. He got empty bottles, vials, and droppers from his father’s room, from the nooks and corners of his own room, his friends’ homes, from the shop, and brought them all under one roof.

“Now you see,” he told Marinette, placing them in rows, “this is my factory, my laboratory, my studio, my temple, my dorm, and dome.”

“Except that it is in the way of our hosting,” said Marinette, “Our guests will walk right past this perfume curry on the way to the drawing room. I wish this house was built better. Why did this little room have to be here?”

“This was to be a servant’s room or a cloak room. Now forget about it,” said Russi.

But Marinette rolled her eyes every time she had to lead her guests past this room of smells – sometimes strong, sweet, and wicked, sometimes all mixed up.

But she stopped peeking into this room as Russi got busier and busier with the thickness of his dreams wrapped in olfactory mist.

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It was somewhere around this time that Russi realized he needed an assistant.

Marinette stamped her foot, "Why do we require a maid?"

"Think of it as a helper."

"Are you playing with words again, Russ? She would be all over the place with her dirty hands. I would have to clean up after her."

"Rather, wouldn't she clean up after us? Isn't that how it should work?"

"I don't need a maid or maid-of-honour," Pappa croaked amidst this husband-wife squabble.

"It's not for you, Puhppa," Marinette rolled her eyes.

"Alright, it's for me. Only me, and she won't really leave this room, okay?" said Russi.

"That sounds good. So where will she be?" Marinette slumped on the velvet couch in his dome.

"When she's not helping, she can sit on that stool in the corner," he said.

Marinette looked at the steel stool near the door. "Now this works for me." She stood up and in a gesture to stab Pappa for still being in the room, bent forward and smooched Russi.

Her smell drove him nuts, blowing the living daylights out of him in bolts and shafts. But the touch of her lips on his, by itself did nothing.

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Now Russi set to work. His dream was going to unfurl soon, in this very room. He set bottles, vials, and jars in rows. He bought an extra fridge. He ordered the most exotic flowers: rhizomes, gingers, heliconias, dawn flowers, osmanthus, plumeria, mimosa, narcissus, geranium, cassie, ambrette, and caladiums.

He got baskets for tree bark, twigs, resins, and roots, and crucibles for seeds of carrot, coriander, caraway, cocoa, nutmeg, mace, cardamom, and anise. He bought jars for sandalwood, rosewood, agarwood, birch, cedar, pine, and juniper.

He placed all these baskets side by side of: blackcurrant leaf, vanilla, and juniper berry with hay leaves, tomato, lavender, patchouli, sage, violets, rosemary, and citrus. Another for oranges, lemons, limes, and grapefruit rinds.

Lastly Russi placed a stack of paper blotters on the table to spray and test perfumes.

Now his laboratory was set.

He rolled up his sleeves, and began plucking petals, crushing them in see-through jars, soaking them in grain alcohol, and waiting and waiting patiently. He extracted essential oils, distilling them in separate vials, counting and noting drops of lavender or tea tree, rose or sandalwood, base oil, coconut oil, citrus oil, and kept inhaling, testing and waiting for 24 hours for the harvest of rich new worlds to open up: of

poetry and stories, places, and feelings that would take root and come to life, and stay as long as he kept inhaling.

He stored this magic in air-tight aluminium bottles, and refrigerated them at low temperatures, checking them every once in a while.

Soon Marinette stopped arranging flowers in vases, and stifled her knack for potpourris. She had gone to a special class to learn the art of potpourri arrangements just before marriage, but she had never mentioned that. It had been an expensive class.

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Russi lost track of the months, in pursuit of that unique combination of base oil + top note + hard note + carrier oil that would become his signature fragrance. Something that would suit men and women, jump forms of body, metamorphose masculine and feminine sides like a transgender - trans-genre of evolving spices. Something that would morph into the heavens, pristine faraway places, feelings of first love, innocence, forever-youth, peace, joy, spice, beauty, where souls could sing from a sleep they had just woken up from.

Only then he would look up from his ampoules to watch fast-moving wisps of clouds through the window that drifted like tendrils over Bombay, that had now changed its name to Mumbai.

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Stella sat on the stool, as still as a terracotta doll.

She was the colour of glazed clay. She had been an orphan from the time she could remember. She had survived years, occupying the least space, caring for people around her. Then at 18, she left the orphanage because in spite of being mute and muffled, someone saw her as a woman, especially at night when people became shifting shadows.

The orphanages of the world were for children, thought Stella. The world – an orphaned oyster – was for grownups, so we could fall into them and turn into pearls. Now she prayed to Jesus to air-drop her into a wide-mouthed, safe-house oyster.

When she enlisted in a maid's bureau, the first thing that happened was they put her in touch with Russi's house.

Stella was inert and frightened the day she arrived. Her eyes were the only things that moved like living insects, and Marinette liked that.

"Are we hiring her then?" asked Russi, without looking up.

"I guess we're. I'll arrange a place for her to put her things," said Marinette, cat-walking away.

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Every morning now, Stella stood near Russi, watching him. At intervals, she washed phials, picked petals off the floor, wiped liquids, kept tiny bottles back in a row. She remembered the sequence in which Russi had picked each vial up. He did not number them, and she didn't dare inhale them.

Later, because they were petals fallen from grace, from such wonderful flowers, Stella did not discard them, but strung them into a sequence with the silence of night, near a moonlit window. The next day, her ornaments would be a floral wristband, a garland, a necklace, or a crown.

Only after she started wearing these blooms, did Russi become aware of her. He knew when she was near without once looking at her. She had the oddest of smells: bathroom tile with lavender, washbasin with jasmine, wet broom with rose. She was repulsive then faintly attractive, he noticed.

“I’m happy with your neatness. Everything can be easily found,” he mumbled.

Stella nodded, and that was it.

She would sit for god-alone-knows how many hours on the stool, as Russi crushed and crushed petals and months flew by.

Marinette’s friends had now got used to Russi in his checked shorts and bush shirts, gazing deeply into his multi-coloured vials. To them he was a grandma lost in her funeral crochet, a chef in his culinary pots, a priest in his worshipping.

The house was heady with perfume. Sometimes Marinette wondered if the furniture and her selected décor even mattered.

“Even a barren house smelling this good would be welcoming enough,” she told her friends, “like wafts of cooking from a hut can appease a very hungry person – no matter rich or poor.”

Day by day, Marinette got more and more angered over Russi’s perfumes. They hovered over her decorating skills. Would she have to compete with smells now? *Invisible as they were - irritating and imaginary as they were?*

In fits of rage, she would avoid Russi’s laboratory for days.

“I didn’t know I was getting into this – a house of perfumes, a business of perfumes, a life of perfumes.” She said over the phone to a friend or her mother.

Even though there were people at home, Marinette spent much of her time over the phone. It soon grew into a routine of two-hourly conversations before lunch, two-hourly conversations before sundown.

Until one day she overheard *Puppa* and Russi talking about names for new perfumes and shapes for bottles. (They came up with the most ridiculous names - their ideas befitting phenol bottles!) She couldn’t sit still.

“May I suggest something?” said Marinette.

The men looked at her.

“I can design bottles! I have a few names for them too.”



“That would be great,” nodded Russi, coming over to Marinette. “Would you do that for me, Marin? That would be so good,” he swung his head this way and that.

“I could try.” She shrugged.

After a few days, Marinette said, “The women’s perfumes could be Calamus and Fugue. The ones for young adults - Forever 16, Nutty Nostalgia, Love Ittar Uttar, and for the men - 11 pm Salve, Midnight Splash, Eternal Peril. How about that?”

Russi took in a deep breath, smiling like a torch.

As soon as Marinette took to the designing of the bottles, the house fell into a rhythm of unified quiet for the first time in years, as if people living in the same house were also from the same century.

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“Where would I go now? No Ma, it’s too late. I am old for this. Another start? Another relationship? Another chance?” Pappa overheard Marinette say over the phone.

The next day, he saw that she had plunged into reading about glass bottles, their shapes and designs, themes for bottle caps, and packaging.

Everyday, one of the libraries or the newspaper *chokra* boy delivered books and glossies.

Marinette’s bottle-prototypes were unique: one that looked like a CD, its cap - a guitar knob, or one bottle shaped like a female body - its cap a mop of tresses. For the men, it was shades of brown-coloured, broad-muscled bottles. Some with rainbow glints for *those* men.

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Russi, meanwhile, forgot about the shop like it was a disposable appendage. His father took care of the imports, pricing, advertisements, promotions during festivals, and year-end discount schemes.

One day, Pappa came home to speak about shifting their shop into a mall. “That way we’d have larger space. Our shop is too small, and on the road where they are now digging for a flyover. Nobody’s coming to buy anything. And what do you think - can they smell anything in that dust, heat, and noise?”

He wasn’t asking Russi, just informing him. The next week, Russi was made to visit a large white space in an under-construction mall, where door and window frames were being sawed into place.

“How do you find this?” asked Pappa.

“It’s beautiful,” Russi nodded at his father with pride.

The next when Russi visited the shop, it was on its inauguration day, three months later. His signature perfume still hadn’t reached fruition, but he had arrived at least with his second-best satisfactory scent.

“Let’s start with that as we wait for your top notch discoveries,” said his father, wringing his hands with a glint in his eyes.

Russi had provided a career to his retired father. Usually, fathers handed down businesses to their sons. That's why Russi felt so proud, as he got back to work over his quintessential smell-bouquet, without a worry.

As the new shop flourished, father and son did not get into any more arguments, just like Russi did not have to expend another word to the person sitting on the stool, either. She could read his thoughts.

Before he knew it, she would bring the exact basket of flowers. Before he said it, the exact top notes from a hundred others, the exact base oils from a thousand others. And those vials vanished as soon as his work was done with them.

It was as if silence spoke a new language. Russi reckoned now that whenever he entered his lab, he could immediately sense if *she* was there or not. He remembered her name too – Stella - and much more - the shape of her presence, the length of her breaths, the dance of her shadow over his sunlit windows. He could sense her true smells away and apart from the bathroom and washbasin ones. They were of yesterday's blossoms, of yesteryear's florets.

That was when he decided paper blotters weren't helping. He pondered for an entire day before requesting *her* to put out her hands for the testing.

He would spray on her arms different scents, and inhale and inhale, registering their molecular mixes, as she stood with her hands outstretched, bearing the ticklish touches of Russi's nose - like footprints on wet roads - yet not once moving or wincing.

Now her arms were his property.

He inhaled and inhaled her skin, searching, searching, on his long odouriferous journey.

Stella would wipe the scent off her arms, every now and then, with cotton swabs of witch hazel in the same time that Russi would rid his nose of smells by inhaling into a jar of coffee beans. Both of their breaks would synchronize.

He wouldn't have guessed that Stella rubbed her body with coconut and jojoba oils every night for an hour, making her skin ready for his sprays the next day.

The next morning her skin would be ready to soak scents again, to hold Russi's ambrosial discoveries for as long as they could. She knew the exact way Russi's fingers would lock over her wrists, gripping them in his tight clutches, as he drew in and drew in zephyr.

Sometimes between these rituals, Marinette's voice would reverberate over a phone conversation, through the house, "Yeah, we had brought her to help me, but now she's his pet dog. Yeah! It fills the spaces around... ha ha ha. Yeah, our marriage is the same size as a large empty house, though a scented one *haan*."

*How did scents fill up all our empty spaces?*

Thought Marinette, as she spoke...

Thought Stella, as she lent her hands...

Thought Russi, as he inhaled...

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“Tuberose suits you,” Russi whispered one day to Stella. “It’s so narcotic, almost bewitching... sensual like jasmine, but pungent at the edge. *Eloqueen* – that’s the name I’m calling this new perfume, after what it has done to your skin Stella.”

“Surprising,” Russi muttered, “this same scent on Marinette’s skin smells so different. Not like this.”

Stella let out a gasp - something completely misplaced and too human out of her.

Pigments were beginning to turn into colour like sodden petals, colourless thoughts, like in a laboratory moulding between nose and nostril.

“But I will gift Marinette a perfume too,” said Russi. He looked around for another molecular mixture, fishing out a lemon-laced one he had been saving for years. He would gift this to her. He had to be fair. By now, they knew Marinette couldn’t have children. And so Russi made a special attempt to gift some of his best perfumes to her. Like lavender and rose with a ginger top note, that disintegrated the moment a knife of breath dragged into it.

Marinette showed some delight on receiving these little gift bottles. She could wear his bespoke perfumes to parties, but Russi never heard from her after that. *Her smiles over these gifts are only as light as the whiffs they produce*, he thought sadly.

True perfume wasn’t jewellery, a high fashion bag, or boots that could be held out, shown off, or bragged about. It didn’t have weight. It was pipe music, an embroidered backcloth. Even when her friends remarked about her new scents, Russi did not find Marinette speak much about them.

That made him curious. *What were the smells she was proud of, then?*

In one last effort, he decided to find out. Russi realized he had not investigated wholly the crux of why he was attracted to Marinette. *Wasn’t it her smells? What about them?* He had got so busy discovering perfumes for his shop and brand that he never really unravelled hers. She wasn’t going to tell him much. He knew that, so this time he was going to just observe.

So after years Marinette became a woman of intrigue to Russi again.

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One fine morning, he stayed asleep in their bed citing a headache. He watched Marinette creaming, toning, and moisturizing herself after she woke up. He pretended to sleep as she began fixing her bath water. Marinette strode in a shower robe massaging her scalp with coconut, olive, almond, castor, and *amla* oils.

Russi entered the bathroom on the pretext of using the bathroom, to find her bathtub infused with curd, honey, rose petals, and lemon. Russi felt like he had fallen off the brink of his dreams. Yes... these were the lingering fragments that had driven him up the wall for long.

Much to Marinette's chagrin he closed the bathroom door, and dipped his hands into the hot bathtub of steaming aromas. Amidst it was milk and bath-salts dissolving at the base. His fingers touched those tiny dispersing remnants.

He drew his hands out, and dug into the bathroom cabinet of moisturizers and skin conditioners, smelling all of them, allowing riffs of scent to play into his mental archive in one continuous sweep. *So, this was it! All of this...! Accumulated. Culminated. The Marinette that he had known.*

*But wait... if she used so many aromas where were her real smells...? Of her armpit, sweat, body, vagina? How little did he know of her, even when they had lived together for so many years?*

*Did they really live together?*

He would have to wait for her to sleep now.

By night, all perfumes evaporated like the day's happenings.

Russi tossed in bed the whole day, skimming through books and newspapers, watching television. This was the first day he didn't go to his laboratory.

The day passed slowly. Marinette went about her work around the house, and came often to the bedroom or bathroom to peep at herself in the mirror or groom up a bit, before answering the doorbells.

Finally at dusk, Russi watched with weary half-closed, bored eyes Marinette entering their bedroom and rubbing night-time moisturizers thoroughly into her skin.

"You never told me where you picked this up from?" he asked groggily, breaking the hoarseness of his voice.

"What?"

"This routine?"

"Why do you ask me now after so many years then?" She looked at him intently through the mirror's reflection.

"I just discovered that you use many scents, oils, creams..." He felt guilty for saying all this.

"My parfum man! I love them. I live for them," said Marinette.

She sighed, letting her shoulders droop, "You know... we were poor when I was young! My father couldn't afford luxury. He lost all his money in gambling or lending. Our skins were always dry - come winter, rain, or summer. My skin was so chapped, that it changed something within me."

Marinette looked afar, at a point of infinity, into the mirror. "Maybe my self-image? I looked like a hag when I was growing up. Dry as a desert. When it got bad, mama would give us the last of the butter wrappings to rub it over our flaky shins. So the moment I earned enough, I spent all of it on cosmetics. Entire salary checks from my first job! I never stopped after that. Even after we got back our father's money, I would spend everything on creams and lotions."

So saying, Marinette rubbed blobs of serum over her neck and arms. "I keep creams everywhere. I see to it that my skin feels replenished for all that it lost, all these years."

*Who is she without this then? Without this scent and habit?* thought Russi.

The night grew thick like a base note around them.

It was five in the morning when Russi opened his heavy eyelids again. He rolled over the sheets, closer to Marinette and stealthily inhaled her hair, face, heaving body, and moved over to smell her knees, shins, and toes. He waited and did this one more time. Then, once more.

*Rubber. Paper. Wood.*

She smelt of nothing.

*Who was she?*

*Who was he?*

*Who were they?*

He felt a stab. Of emptiness.

Something cracked inside him and oozed, spreading infinitely.

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Russi sat at his lab the next day, but did not touch his vials. He decided to give himself a break. Two holidays in a row for the first time in a decade.

He stared out of the window. He had forgotten it had existed just above his work table. And there was a city outside that window.

Outside, the city had changed. Its automobiles - Fiat cabs -- were now increasingly yellow-and-black Maruti cabs. The roads were different. The people dressed differently. There were more youths in the crowd. The posters of new films were larger. The films looked edgier, risqué and for some reason, cheap like thrill-ride tickets.

He had missed so much between his vials.

He suddenly grew aware of the figure sitting on the stool near the door, playing with a tonka bean.  
*Stella!*

She who had been around him for years, every day, every single minute, helping him in his never-ending search. She who smelt of bathroom tile, detergent, and water, except on her arms, and then after all

those smells, Russi knew why he was so shattered... with Marinette. Stella smelled of what he had never smelt between his nostrils. Made of real feeling, longing, dreaming, wishing, and caring... Wrapped in the silence of promises never spoken, emotions never mentioned, feelings never stated.

It came to him like a lightning bolt.

*She* became aware of him looking at her and trembled, lifting her gaze from her toes. Just today she had lined her eyes in kohl, worn a new dress wide at the collar bones that she had stitched herself - that matched with her skin tone. Stella was celebrating the joy of *first times* – the firsts of everything... that she had found inside herself: her own musk, her intoxicating silent song of her strong desires, her own continuous aphrodisiac hum.

She could feel herself melting now, as Russi watched her, for long, as if struck by something sharp.

She was nothing now, but a heap of her desires. He was the first man who hadn't looked at her and yet when he did, it was as if she had just appeared over the face of the earth. As if she was born whole – at 21. He was man enough to touch her feather-light with his delicate fingertips, not some rough shoves. She felt human first, then girl, then woman.

He smelt her aroma this far, thickly and sweetly.

For the first time Russi was sure what real perfume was. It was better than all he had looked out for all these years.

He gave an inept smile, adjusting his spectacles and Stella blinked back, equally artlessly.