

THE PERFECT SCENT

CHANDLER BURR



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Chandler Burr is the scent critic for *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* and the author of *The Emperor of Scents: A Story of Perfume, Obsession, and the Last Mystery of the Senses*. His first book was *A Separate Creation*, about the hunt for the biology of sexual orientation. Burr, who earned a master's in international economics and Japan studies from the Paul H. Nitze School, Johns Hopkins, has written for *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*. He lives in New York City.

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The Emperor of Scent

A Separate Creation

THE PERFECT SCENT



A YEAR INSIDE

THE PERFUME INDUSTRY

IN PARIS AND NEW YORK

CHANDLER BURR

PICADOR

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This book is dedicated to

*Joseph Andrew Tomkiewicz from Wisconsin.
The best friend a guy could reasonably ask for.*

*Ce qui vient au monde pour ne rien troubler,
ne mérite ni égard ni patience.*

WHAT COMES INTO THE WORLD TO DISTURB NOTHING
MERITS NEITHER ATTENTION NOR PATIENCE.

—RENE CHAR (1948)

ART DOES NOT REPRODUCE THE VISIBLE;
RATHER, IT MAKES VISIBLE.

—PAUL KLEE

Les absents ont toujours tort.

THOSE WHO ARE ABSENT ARE ALWAYS WRONG.

—PHILIPPE NERICAULT DESTOUCHES (1717)

ON JUNE 9, 2004, just before 5:00 P.M., Jean-Claude Ellena was being driven to a meeting at the offices of Parfums Hermès in Pantin, just outside the *périphérique* to the northeast of Paris. Ellena was a famous ghost, a member of an elite group of perfumers who create fragrances sold under the names of designers and luxury houses while keeping assiduously to the shadows. But he was just at the point of becoming particularly, and rather extraordinarily, visible to the world. He was on his way to Hermès to submit his first *essais*, his olfactory sketches, for an important scent he was creating.

Paris was enjoying a spell of Los Angeles—like weather. You could look from the top of rue Ménilmontant down over the Centre Georges Pompidou’s industrial modernism all the way to the Eutelsat balloon floating over the Parc André Citroën. In the deep-cobalt summer sky, the cloud of aerosolized filth from the Paris traffic hovered in the blue air. The sun shone brightly. The Parisians walked around wearing black, smoking cigarettes, exhaling ashen fumes into the air, and throwing the butts and packets onto streets where Africans in cotton *bleus de travail* uniforms swept them into sewers.

From his car, Ellena looked out at the bus stops. It seemed as if every single one featured an ad for Chanel’s latest feminine perfume, *Chance*. It was a bit startling. The car crossed an avenue, stopped at a light: *Chance*. It turned right: *Chance*. Ellena looked left; from every vantage the publicity image of a wispy blond girl floated spectrally over the round metallic glass *Chance* bottle. This display represented a breathtaking marketing outlay. If you were in the perfume industry, if you were the competition—say, another immaculate luxury house like Hermès—you might not show any reaction. You might smile, eyes focused just beyond the ads. But you would register them as they slid by your car, this show of Chanel’s stunning power, a silken reminder of the might of this billion-dollar titanium luxury machine. The bus ads were not a campaign. They were a statement. “We are here.” Their ubiquitousness was profoundly intimidating. This was the intention.

Hermès had, in fact, two responses. The first was the three small vials in Ellena’s pocket, each containing a pale golden-colored scent. The second was Ellena himself.



Across the Atlantic not many months later, at 1:00 P.M. on October 29, 2004, the actress Sarah Jessica Parker arrived at the offices of her agent, Peter Hess, at Creative Artists Agency at 162 Fifth Avenue in New York City. She was there to meet representatives from Coty, Inc., the international perfume licensing corporation, whose headquarters were just up the street. Parker and her representatives would be discussing the final details of a contract for the creation of a perfume that would bear her name.

They met in one of the white CAA conference rooms. Along with Hess, Parker’s rep Ina Treciokas from the public relations agency IDPR was present. The Coty contingent numbered four, all perfume industry executives and “creatives” (as those in charge of developing a perfume are called in the industry). There was excellent sushi and a big bowl of popcorn, a neat line of drinks, and bowls of ice. Parker was dressed in relaxed style—jeans and a T-shirt—but she was quite alert to the significance of the meeting and to the variables at play.

Parker had for years been a star on stage and on screen, but she was as aware as anyone of the risks of attempting to transfer the mercurial, amorphous good of celebrity to other domains. In both a symbolic and a literal sense, she

was funding this project with her public equity. But she had for years wanted to create a perfume—“dreamed of it,” as she expressed it eagerly to the Coty team that day. Peter Hess and CAA had been pursuing it for her, making the contacts, talking to the players in the perfume world—the luxury juggernauts like the Lauders and LVMHs, with their brands and labs and marketing armies—and Hess had found the process far from easy; the perfume industry is brutal, and the financial stakes increasingly high. Yet Coty was interested in Parker, and the lawyers—Coty’s and the star’s—had been working on the contract for many months. It had been a complicated negotiation.

Hess naturally shared Parker’s concerns. Were she to give Coty the license to her name and her public identity, the project would entail years of effort on her part and that of the Coty team that would develop the scent with her, millions of dollars put into the launch and a massive promotional campaign, and the risk of her image and reputation.

It would also require of Parker a special, and rather unusual, form of participation. During the development of the scent, she would assume the position known in the industry as artistic director. She would have to guide the perfumers who would build her scent. She would be responsible for directing them toward a precise olfactory representation of an idea of a perfume she already had in her head. Parker had never played the role before—it was the perfumers who understood mixing rose absolute with dihydrojasmonate, not she—and she didn’t, truth be told, know exactly what to expect.



Between 2004 and 2006, I reported these two stories, one for *The New Yorker*, the other for *The New York Times*. Both were intimate behind-the-scenes accounts of two very different people creating two very different perfumes. Ellena’s scent was built at and for Hermès, among the last family-owned exclusive luxury goods houses in France, based in an eighteenth-century shop on the rue du Faubourg. It was created in Paris and in Grasse, France’s traditional capital of scent. Parker’s fragrance was made under the corporate aegis of one of the largest commercial producers of perfume in the world, a company headquartered in a skyscraper in New York City.

The first perfume was *Un Jardin sur le Nil*. The other was *Sarah Jessica Parker Lovely*.

It happened that I fell into both of these stories—they found me, each one in its own particular way. Both of these scents were built to be launched on the \$31-billion international perfume market, and in the course of reporting on their respective creation processes, I spent two years inside this industry, one of the most insular, glamorous, strange, paranoid, idiosyncratic, irrational, and lucrative of worlds.

I am the perfume critic for *The New York Times*, but I am not a visceral perfume obsessive. Some people want me to be, but I’m not. Fundamentally I’m a reporter and critic whose job is to write on perfume—the business, industry, and personalities, and of course the works of commercial art they produce, the perfumes. It’s a professional beat. At the same time, writing about perfume has held a real, and I will admit visceral, surprise, which is that I am now conscious of experiencing the world more deeply and vividly than I’d ever thought possible. Many people situate themselves by sight; they marvel at scenic vistas, take photos, draw pictures, recall images. In this job I find my brain recording time and place in scent. I remember places by smell.

In travel, smell is our best, most reliable landmark. Researchers have found that our ability to recall a specific scent surpasses even our ability to recall what we’ve seen. Show photos to people, then show them the photos months later; it’s estimated that visual recall is about 50 percent after four months. Trygg Engen, a professor of psychology at Brown University, found that people recall smells with 65 percent accuracy after a year. If you’ve been in Africa or Asia or Latin America for any significant period of time and then return home, open your suitcase and take out the clothes, and the aroma places you. You’re in Nairobi or the bush, Bangkok’s center, the beach in Rio. Photos can’t do that. Smell transports us, beautifully, strongly, insistently. The smell of my childhood was South

Texas, but also the aroma of travel, of jet fuel, the synthetic carpets of airports, and the recycled air of planes. My grandmother, Marjorie Langston Stewart, lived in the Corpus Christi of the 1960s, two blocks from the Gulf of Mexico. While I remember her voice and face, she actually exists in my memory as a fragrance: of fresh citrus and the green leaves of the poisonous Texas oleander she warned my sister and me never to touch, the hot wet breezes of the Gulf of Mexico off fishing boats, the clean, rich Victorian smells of the England she grew up in that scented her house, and the scent of her immense, powerful, white 1958 Pontiac's interior. The years I spent following these two stories were mapped in scent in just this way, and I recall its chapters by their smells.

The main actors in each story were utterly different—a French perfumer and an American movie star—and the companies and contexts in which they worked were dissimilar in a thousand ways, but both stories began with a problem.



At Hermès, the problem was simple to identify, tough to solve.

Hermès is as close to an immaculate brand as it is possible to get. In the business world, the name commands absolute respect. But while consumers from Paris to Osaka faithfully snapped up astoundingly expensive Hermès silks, clothes, and leather bags, the Hermès family was quietly aware of a weakness in the house: its perfumes.

Clients on Fifth Avenue and the Ginza, avenue Montaigne and Via Monte Napoleone were reaching for bottles of Chanel, Armani, Calvin Klein, and Dior well before they reached for an Hermès scent. For a luxury house, a perfume problem is not just an image issue. It goes inevitably to the heart of your business. Because of its profit margins and its massive distribution, perfume is a crucial money generator for almost all the high-end houses. It's an open secret that fragrance is essential to the financial health of most of the world's luxury brands. A man I know once sat next to Yves Saint Laurent at a Paris dinner party. He asked, "What portion of Yves Saint Laurent revenues are accounted for by perfume?" Saint Laurent replied, "Eighty-three point five."

By 2004, Hermès (the name's French pronunciation is closest to a combination of "air-mess" and "air-mezz") was ready to confront the perfume problem. Jean-Louis Dumas-Hermès was the head of the family, which owned 75 percent of the house. Dumas was elegant and refined and his personal worth was around \$1.5 billion, and if he presented a certain gentleness that overlay a steely control, he was remarkably free of the arrogance that haute Parisian culture and great wealth could have produced in him. In 2004, Dumas hired a new president of Parfums Hermès, Véronique Gautier. Gautier had a significant reputation.

Dark-haired and dark-eyed, opinionated and direct, Gautier was a veteran of perfume operations at Chanel and Cartier. She was known for two skills: crafting grand strategies and imposing, with an iron will, the decisions needed to get them into place. Gautier had determinedly big vision, and she was relentlessly daring, both qualities Dumas needed. Gautier had, naturally enough, left in her professional wake a division of opinions. "Véronique is admired rather than liked," one of her French competitors, a woman, said with a hard look. Another gave a different assessment: "She knows the business as well as anyone, and she's competent and strong. Jean-Louis will need that."

The figures in front of Gautier were relatively straightforward.

In 2003, the previous year, the Italian jeweler Bulgari had had perfume sales totaling €136,700,000. This represented 18 percent of Bulgari's total revenues of €759,300,000. Hermès in the same year had sold €54 million in perfume—less than half of Bulgari's sales—on a total of €1.23 billion, which meant perfume was only 4.4 percent of Hermès's business.

Dumas and Gautier were exquisitely conscious of the perfume referred to by some in the industry as *le monstre*—the monster—Chanel's *Chanel No. 5*. Here was a ninety-year-old fragrance always at the top of the international bestseller lists, an institution whose 2003 sales had been an astonishing €180 million. Hermès had a collection that

included excellent scents like *Calèche* and *24 Faubourg*, but their sales didn't even touch those of the fabled *No. 5*. Hermès had a waiting list for its \$10,000 Kelly bags, yes, but these Hermès bags consistently carried more Chanel perfume. The question for Dumas and Gautier was: why?

Start with the open secret of the industry, which is that the perfumes purchased from Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren, or Giorgio Armani are not created by these designers. Domenico Dolce and Marc Jacobs don't make their own perfumes. They don't know how. They never have. In fact almost none of the people whose names go on the boxes have ever touched a scent raw material in their lives. All the fragrances in the world are made by an army of professional ghosts called perfumers, who are hired by the designers and brands. The ghosts live in a sort of netherworld carefully hidden from view by the designers' marketing machines. They work primarily for several international scent-maker corporations, the "Big Boys"—Givaudan and Firmenich (both Swiss), IFF (American), Symrise (German), and Takasago (Japanese)—plus the smaller players like Robertet, Drom, Fragrance Resources, Mane, and Belmay. Of them, the fashion houses do not speak publicly. In fact, most of them spend large amounts of money on public relations agencies in Milan, Paris, and New York in order explicitly to create the impression that the perfumes come from the designers.

Estée Lauder created none of her perfumes. A huge international corporation called IFF did. International Flavors & Fragrances is based in New York. Lauder gave the IFF perfumers concepts, she guided the scents to finalization, and she put her name on the scents they made, though not her real name, Josephine Esther Mentzer, nor the real names of the people who actually built the juices for her.

Youth-Dew, Estée Lauder's first perfume, in 1953, was made by the IFF perfumer Josephine Catapano. *Youth-Dew* started as a simple bath oil, just a gift Lauder gave to her clients. Lauder was unknown then, but IFF believed in her. Betty Busse made *Estée*, the legendary Francis Camail built *Aliage* (the following year he would create *Charlie* for Revlon), and the equally legendary Sophia Grojsman (*Trésor* for Lancôme and the beautiful *Jaipur* for Boucheron) did Lauder's *White Linen*, a landmark in everyone's view. *Private Collection* was the creation of Vince Marcello, *Beautiful* was made by five different IFF perfumers. Leonard Lauder gave credit for his multibillion-dollar success to Ernest Shifan, IFF's chief perfumer who encouraged and built a generation of great American scent artists. Estée was, perfumers note, demanding and involved; she had taste and she had vision, and she closely creative-directed the scents they made. But perfumers also note (although they never do so on the record) that saying she created her own perfumes would be, as the perfume expert Michael Edwards phrased it, like saying Pope Julius painted the Sistine Chapel.

This arrangement is standard industry-wide practice. In 1947, Christian Dior's first, *Miss Dior*, was made by two Givaudan perfumers, Jean Carles and Paul Vacher. In 2007, the summer launch by Giorgio Armani, who is well-known for wanting the public to believe he makes his own perfumes, was built for him by the perfumers Francis Kurkdjian and Françoise Caron.

The arrangement is an uneasy one in all sorts of ways. How is an outside perfumer to incarnate a house in scent? What does the perfumer know of that house's aesthetic, taste, or style? Nothing, usually. Here was Hermès, founded as saddle and harness makers on the rue Basse-du-Rempart in 1837 (and hyperconscious of that distinguished date). Hermès was French, which meant that above all it was proud, obsessed with its craftsmanship and its pedigree, a house for whom coherence was a golden rule, and to create its perfumes it went to strangers? The quality of Hermès saddles was reflected in the leather in Hermès belts, all of it a seamless gleaming perfection. Except its fragrances. And this was the thing about *le monstre*.

Only one house did not employ the Big Boys and their perfumers: Chanel. Chanel had Polge. And Jacques Polge, Chanel's in-house perfumer, directed its perfume collection with precision. He was part of the house's genetics. Polge was only the third Chanel perfumer. (The first had been, from 1920, Ernest Beaux, who had created among others *No. 5* and *No. 22* under Coco Chanel's direct artistic direction. The second, Henri Robert, was author of *Cristalle* and

Pour Monsieur.) Polge had authored *Coco* and *Allure* and, in 2001, *Coco Mademoiselle*, which joined the others on the bestseller lists. In him, Chanel had tradition, institutional memory, a coherent aesthetic. And although an in-house perfumer was an expensive proposition, Hermès needed all those things. Of course Dumas and Gautier wanted commercial success. But perhaps more important, they wanted a scent collection with the elegance and coherence of their leather bags and silk ties. They wanted Hermès perfumes, which was to say they wanted beautifully constructed fragrances carefully built by artisans' hands. They wanted perfumes whose exquisite purity distilled Hermès and were worthy of their smooth Gallic pride.

The answer to this, they decided, was a particular perfumer named Jean-Claude Ellena. Gautier flew down to Grasse, where Ellena lived, to make the proposal. She and Dumas already had plans for the initial Hermès perfume Ellena would make, but first they had to get him on board.



My entry into the second story began when I got a call from Belinda Arnold, Coty's director of public relations at Coty's New York headquarters at Park Avenue and East Thirty-third Street.

Coty researches, develops, launches, and manages its brands. It claims to be the world's largest fragrance company, with annual net sales of \$2.9 billion. (It doesn't publish the gross; Coty's principal competitors, LVMH, Estée Lauder, and L'Oréal, also lay claim to number one status, which depends a bit on accounting and a bit on exchange rates.) Coty operates in over twenty-five countries. Since Coty's playing field is global, its strategy calculates interests in markets across the planet. It owns Davidoff, which is minor in North America and a huge player in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and Coty continually acquires licenses to fortify its positions and expand into new markets. It also enters into strategic distribution partnerships. The perfume lines Nina Ricci, Carolina Herrera, Prada, Paco Rabanne, and Comme des Garçons are owned by a Coty competitor, the Spanish company Puig, but Coty distributes these brands in the United States.

Where Hermès makes all its own products itself, with its own designers, artisans, and raw materials—except its perfumes, and hiring Ellena was the effort to remedy this—Coty is a licensee, which is to say that it contracts with brands that are not part of itself and makes these brands' products using other people's materials. This is the way the large-scale perfume industry works. In 2005, when Belinda Arnold approached me, Coty, between its two divisions—"Prestige" and "Beauty"—was already huge and owned or licensed around thirty-five brands. It had celebrities—Gwen Stefani, Céline Dion, Shania Twain, David and Victoria Beckham, Kate Moss, Kylie Minogue, and the Olsen twins—and some brands that were huge in Europe like *Jil Sander*, *Joop*, *Lancaster*, and *Rimmel*. It had the supercommercial—from the license for Kimora Lee Simmons's Baby Phat line that produced the hideous *Goddess* to the license for the TV series *Desperate Housewives* that led to a pleasant commercial feminine of the same name—and it owned upscale antique brands like Pierre Cardin. It had the purest pop-culture licenses; Chupa Chups, the candy company, had lent its name to a perfume that Coty had had built. And Coty had just bought Unilever's entire fragrance division, which meant it had bought the licenses of several high-end designers from Calvin Klein and Marc Jacobs to Vera Wang, Kenneth Cole, and Vivienne Westwood, as well as Cerruti and Chloé.

In a difference partly theological, partly quite real, where Hermès was grappling with making its products authentic, Coty was grappling with making its products legitimate. In a sense this was due to one of the most astounding commercial successes the business world had seen in decades, a trend created almost single-handedly by Coty.

Celebrity perfumes caught everyone unawares except Catherine Walsh. Walsh arguably created them. Then senior vice president for cosmetics and American licenses at Coty Lancaster, Walsh, with an immense amount of work and risk, put together the deal that signed Jennifer Lopez. When Lopez's *Glow* hit the market in 2002, it exploded, selling

8 million bottles in a few short years. The modern incarnation of the celebrity perfume was born. The question for the celebrity perfume is, of course, how much of the celebrity is actually in the bottle. Did the marquee name have anything to do with its creation at all, and (moreover) how did the development process—a somewhat delicate dance between licensee and star—lead to a bottle of perfume? Belinda Arnold's job was a bit simpler; when the juices launched, she merely had to get the word out.

Belinda is one in an amazing army of young Manhattan PR women, all attractive and slender, tastefully dressed and urban-cool and carefully professional. PR is not, generally, a pretty business, and some of its practitioners can at moments slip into a certain nastiness. Belinda never did. She didn't do sweetie-sweetie either. When I'd picked up, she'd just said, "Listen, Sarah Jessica Parker is going to be coming out with a fragrance."

Really, I said. So you guys are doing it, huh.

"Yep. It's coming out early fall. It's called *Lovely*."

I said to her what I always say: There has to be a story. So what's the story? The usual reply is a perky "But the story is [name of celebrity or designer] is doing a fragrance!" (You say thank you and hang up politely.)

Belinda didn't. She replied, "What do you have in mind?" I thought about it for a second—I wasn't taking it all that seriously; it was, after all, a celebrity perfume, an actress—and said to Belinda, Parker's strongly associated with New York. What I'd really like to do is wander around New York with her and smell the city.

Silence on the phone. "*Smell* the city," she said. "What does that mean."

I want, I said, to smell the brick walls in the Village with her, and the tire rubber the taxis leave on the asphalt on Fourteenth Street, the subway air coming up out of the Astor Place station, and the scent of Central Park and the brackish water in the Hudson River.

Silence again.

We can drive around the city in a taxi. Or maybe we could just walk around the Village. But I want to smell New York with her.

"And talk about the perfume."

And talk about the perfume. About how she perceives smell, and so, you know, how she creative-directed her perfume. (It seemed obvious to me. Clearly it wasn't to Belinda.)

"Hm," she said briefly, "well, I don't think she's going to like that."

Is she interested in scent?

"Actually," Belinda replied forthrightly, "she's completely obsessed with it."

I didn't necessarily believe this. OK, I said, so that's a start.

"Hm," she said.

A few days later, she called me back, laughing. "She really likes it. She'll do it."

Huh. Uh—great! (What the hell do I do now?)

"I mean, we'll have to refine it," she said.

Sure, sure, I said. I was thinking, This is weird.

I proposed the story to Andy Port, my principal editor at *T*, *The New York Times's* style magazine, and she was both skeptical and interested. She asked, "Do you think it's going to be a serious scent, and do you think Sarah Jessica is actually going to be involved?" I told her what Belinda had said, that she was very hands-on during the creation, very serious about it. Andy said, "We'd want an exclusive." Back to Belinda: We'd want an exclusive.

"OK, let me check, but I think we can do that. Just on the perfume, right?" Right.

I thought, How to go about this damn piece.

It wound up being a year behind the scenes with Sarah Jessica Parker and the Coty team, not only for the launch of her perfume but for an iteration of that perfume that they created together. But that is getting ahead of the story.

Je sens tressaillir en moi quelque chose qui se déplace, voudrait s'élever, quelque chose qu'on aurait désancré, à une grande profondeur; je ne sais ce que c'est, mais cela monte lentement; j'éprouve la résistance et j'entends la rumeur des distances traversées.... Mais quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'édifice immense du souvenir.



I feel shudder within me something that is moving, something that wants to come up, a thing at great depth that I've unanchored. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly. I can measure the resistance, and I can hear the echoes of distances traveled.... But when nothing subsists from a distant past, after the people are dead, after the things are destroyed, all alone—more frail yet more alive, more immaterial, more resilient, more faithful—the smell and taste of things endure in time, like souls reminding, waiting, hoping on the ruin of all the rest and bearing unflinchingly, in tiny and almost impalpable droplets, the immense edifice of memory.

—MARCEL PROUST, *The Remembrance of Things Past*

I BECAME THE PERFUME critic of *The Times* in 2006 owing to a series of coincidences. No one was more surprised than I was. I'd studied in China and worked in Japan and gotten a master's degree in international economics and Japanese political economy, then—credit the haphazardness of life—became a science journalist for *The Atlantic*. This led me, after a chance encounter at the Gare du Nord train station in Paris with a biophysicist and perfume genius, to write a book called *The Emperor of Scent* about the creation of a new, radical theory of olfaction. I'd been talking to *The New Yorker* about possible projects—I'd proposed articles on Chinese and Indian economic development, Japanese politics—and one day they counterproposed, to (a bit) my consternation. They were interested in my writing a piece on the creation of a new perfume. Its development, from the first instant to the launch. Behind the scenes, real time, full access.

I'd never considered such a project. As a journalist, I was an Asianist, and I'd happened to do a book that touched on perfume; I assumed that that was finished. But OK, I said, I'd take a look.

I started going to houses. Not one of them would do it. I proposed the idea to an American designer. I had a meeting in a midtown skyscraper with the designer's PR person. "We'd love to have six thousand words in *The New Yorker*," she said straightforwardly, then after assessing me for an instant added, "but it would contradict our entire public strategy, the myth that he makes his own scents." She said no. They all turned me down—Givenchy, Estée Lauder, Kenneth Cole, Dior, Jo Malone. The Burberry PR rep, baffled, whined repeatedly in his cell phone, "I don't *understand*, you want to watch them make a *perfume*? ..." Then, his neurons overtaxed, he simply hung up. Chanel considered the project seriously but then radio silence. Guerlain reacted with shocked horror; it was unthinkable. Armani passed. Ralph Lauren's PR person never even bothered to respond.

At one point someone mentioned Hermès. I dismissed the idea. The house struck me as far too constricted. Two months later, with little expectation, I took the project to Francesca Leoni, then the head of communications for Hermès in the United States. Francesca immediately said, "This is a good project; we'll do it."

And then she presented it to Paris.

I don't know everything they discussed, but I know that Jean-Claude was an advocate, that Hélène Dubrulle, the company's international-marketing director, and Stéphane Wargnier, director of international communications, were cautiously favorable, and that Véronique Gautier was the primary opponent. I say this without the slightest resentment; Gautier was protecting the house and its people. It was her job. Here was some journalist, some American. She knew I spoke French—Francesca had strategically placed us together at a cocktail reception for a photography show at the Hermès boutique on Madison Avenue, and we'd begun a conversation—but she didn't know *me*. And I wanted total access, for a year. I know that in Paris they were having discussions, and more discussions, and arguments pro and con. Those in favor smoothed feathers and quietly addressed concerns and explained

what was this magazine *The New Yorker*—some of them knew it, others didn't; "That's the American equivalent of *l'Express*, non?" one of them asked me once (uh, not exactly). The (once again) went over the project's concept and (once again) who I was. And with an expert touch from those in favor, we were all guided to a place where we could see it happening.

Véronique said yes.



Ellena lives near the place in the South of France where, on April 7, 1947, he was born.

His family lived in Grasse. His father was a perfumer. "He had talent," Ellena would say later with affection, "but he was a dabbler." He himself had learned his craft from the craft itself, said Ellena, and from the place. As a small boy, he would leave the house at dawn with his grandmother to pick jasmine flowers. Sometimes the women who were harvesting would sit him on a wall and demand that he sing for them. He smelled the combination of jasmine—a flesh-scented flower—and sweat. Cumin smells like human sweat.

At age sixteen Ellena began working in the factory of l'Etablissement Antoine Chiris in Grasse, one of the oldest perfume houses in the world. Then at twenty-one, he left Grasse—was 1968—for Geneva to enter his formal training to become a perfumer at the Givaudan perfume school.

The daily schedule of the students—committing to memory the smells of synthetic and natural materials, classifying scents, botany, chemistry, learning how to build a jasmine scent, a hyacinth, a rose—he found all of it rather boring. So instead he asked Givaudan master perfumer Maurice Thiboud to give him some real work to do. Thiboud entrusted him with the job of re-creating, from smell, a perfume that was on the market. (It was a common task at the time, a sort of reverse engineering, taking some Dior perfume, say, and copying it, like young artists studiously reproducing *Mona Lisas*.) Ellena did it. Thiboud gave the young man his second perfume. Ellena re-created that one. (To amuse himself, he also deconstructed it by removing materials, simplifying the scent into its elemental form.) A third, a fourth. After nine months of observing him, Thiboud told Ellena, "I'm taking you out of the school. You're going to become a junior Givaudan perfumer under me."

The first perfume he made was a small thing, of orange and patchouli, destined for the African market.

Ellena had not gone to Geneva alone. When he'd been eighteen a few days and she was still seventeen, he had met Susannah Cusak, the daughter of Irish immigrants. She had grown up in Grasse but spoke English with a quick, sharp Irish accent mixed with touches of French. Her family were artist-intellectuals. Her father, Ralph Cusak, was a painter. Her great-uncle was Samuel Beckett. Both were Irishmen who preferred French soil. "I immediately felt comfortable in this universe," Ellena said. "Susannah liked rational argument. She taught me how to structure myself." He married her, in 1967, when he was twenty.

It was she who, as he put it, gave him the virus for reading. He read Baudelaire, Labori. His favorite was Jean Giono. "His books give a sense to life in affirming that life has no logic," said Ellena. "Like Giono, I believe in the necessity of a spirituality without religion."

don't bother God, I count on myself, and I believe in people." He read art books, and in particular he read books on painting. Whatever would feed his developing ideas of perfume? (He got a taste for painting watercolors, something he still does.)

Susannah hadn't known anyone in the perfume business. "I didn't know this world," she said. "It's part of Jean-Claude, so it's part of my life. I enjoy Jean-Claude so I enjoyed the perfume."

In 1966 his father had given Ellena, who was nineteen years old, a perfume industry magazine with an article by Edmond Roudnitska. Roudnitska was a legendary perfumer who single-handedly built much of Dior's estimable collection: *Diorama* (1949), *Diorissimo* (1956), *Eau Sauvage* (1966), and *Diorella* (1972). The piece Ellena came across was titled "Advice to Young Perfumer." It had changed him. Years later, at age thirty, Ellena went to visit the master in a small town called Cabris, near Grasse. Roudnitska sent him away. "You smell of synthetic musks," he said. "Come back when you don't smell of anything." Ellena returned the next morning, and the two started to talk, and Ellena spent the day in awe.

Jean-Claude and Susannah had a house built in Spéracèdes, a small town of paradigmatic Côte d'Azur idyllic loveliness, and in that house—with a one-year exile in New York for his work with Givaudan—raised two children, a daughter, Céline, who became a perfumer, and a son, Hervé, an architect. The couple still live there. There was no garden by the house, so they created one. So as not to make any aesthetic mistakes, they planted only blue or white flowers. Then they added olive trees, fruit trees—cherry, apricot. Bernard Ellena, Jean-Claude's brother—also a perfumer—lives nearby. Susannah's brother lives in the house next door and has a small vineyard. Every year they harvest the grapes and make wine, which is ready by the holidays. At Christmas there are thirty of them.



Hermès had made the decision to take Ellena as the house's perfumer either very rapidly or very slowly. It depended on what day you asked him.

When the family started discussing Ellena, he was unaware of their interest. They, however, were well aware of him. He had—as an external perfumer at one of the anonymous scent makers called Symrise—just made them a scent.

The creation of a perfume begins with "the brief," the conceptual road map of the perfume that the designers and luxury houses and the creatives give the perfumers. Basically, the brief is the description of the new scent that they have in their minds. They may convey it to the perfumer in a single sentence. They may write pages. Givenchy created a brief composed of images; the concept of *Acqua di Giò* was Armani asking for the smells of Pantelleria in the Sicilian islands, where he has a home. For *J'adore*, the creatives at Parfums Dior simply told the perfumer Calice Becker to create a fragrance "as sexy as a stiletto and as comfortable as a pair of Tod's." (Becker created a multimillion-dollar hit.) The creative team responsible for the perfume *Vera Wang* saw a giant bouquet of white flowers in her store. The brief that gave the perfumer Harry Frémont was, essentially, to recreate it in a bottle. Briefs can be videotapes, songs, paintings.

Hermès's briefs were highly determined by a peculiarity of the house. Each year, Jean-

Louis Dumas came up with a theme to guide the house. If Hermès launched a perfume the year, like all Hermès products it somehow followed that theme. In 2002, Dumas had chosen the Mediterranean, and Gautier, newly installed, had created her perfume brief from that. She had discovered that the Tunisian-French woman who designed the window displays at Hermès's boutiques had a garden on the beach not far from Tunis. The brief she sent out to the perfumers at the various Big Boy scent makers (among them Ellena) dictated, "Make me a perfume that smells of the scents found in this Tunisian garden." Ellena had thought about mixed things and agonized a bit and changed the mix and sent in his submission with those of his competitors. He wound up winning the brief and creating *Un Jardin en Méditerranée*. Garden in the Mediterranean. It was Véronique Gautier's first perfume for Hermès, Ellena's second. He'd done the delectable, sparkling *Amazonne* for the house in 1989.

Without his knowledge, this had put him on the family's map.

With the launch of *Un Jardin en Méditerranée* in early 2002 they started talking internally about him and the possible perfumer's position. In Paris, Ellena met Jean-Louis Dumas at Hermès, and they chatted. Ellena's wife, Susannah, was with him, and she remembers Dumas making some typically elegant comments to her: "I like your husband; he's subtle and intelligent, and it's nice to work with him." Ellena was flattered and thought, That's nice, and then thought nothing more about it. Later he heard (he doesn't remember how) that Dumas had said to Gautier, "You should go see Ellena; maybe we can do something with him," and the expression struck him. What could it mean. Probably another commission for an Hermès perfume. Which was great.

"I'd learned," he would say much later, "that everything at Hermès is slow. Which I like because I'm slow too. I don't like fast things. I'd had a few conversations with [Dumas] of a few minutes each. The man looks you right in the eyes like a child, ready to be delighted. He poses pertinent questions, with just a little control on your points as you speak. They never ever told me they were considering me as in-house perfumer; it simply happened like a level of oxygen rising very slowly in a room, and it's a tortuous system because you become completely seduced by them and at any moment the bottom can drop out from under you. And at the same time you're not even sure you want it. Or that they're even thinking about it. Until they tell you they are."

In February 2004, Véronique Gautier called him. Not a formal offer. Not yet. Just an idea. Very quiet. Still, she was extremely excited. "*Qu'est-ce tu en penses?*" So what do you think? He was still caught extremely surprised. "I can be sort of cold in my reactions," said Ellena, "which is to say that I don't jump around. It was interiorized."

Ellena said, We have to see each other. Gautier got on a plane with Stéphane Wargnier to the Côte d'Azur. Wargnier has huge longish curly hair and a presence as large as Gautier's; they tend to make each other expand with exclamations and observations. Wargnier always appears to have secrets and to be on the excited verge of maybe sharing them with you. Where she dresses with rich sobriety, he tends toward brilliant sapphire blue shirts and touches of exuberant Cuban reds and hot pinks mixed with expensive jackets and strangely exotic shoes. Wargnier's style is seventh-arrondissement chic with a nod to Rio de Janeiro.

Wargnier had operated at the top of the French luxury goods game for a while and was well known in those circles. He had both supporters (for his control and style) and detractors

(who found his particular flamboyance less than appealing). He also had, both sides acknowledged, the complete confidence of Jean-Louis Dumas-Hermès.

They met Ellena in a restaurant, La Bastide Saint Antoine. “Jacques Chibois,” said Ellena (referring to the chef), and then added not entirely as an afterthought, “*deux étoiles.*” Two stars. They talked at dinner about the possibilities. He found it a grave responsibility and was cautiously elated and cautiously unnerved. To be the *parfumeur d’Hermès*, to represent Hermès. He found them very positive about this role—yes, they said, he’d be used this way put before the public as an Hermès creator “*mais de manière très soft.*” But very gently.

Ellena admired the house, though he wasn’t a consumer of Hermès products. “*La mode m’intéresse pas,*” he said. Fashion doesn’t interest me. (Ellena has a very precise style, about which he is fastidious, a specific equilibrium of formal and informal that could be described as Ralph Lauren in London after pheasant hunting at a corporate retreat. It sounds fussy but actually isn’t at all. It’s mostly the corporate retreat part. Relaxed country slacks, obviously expensive. He never wears a suit or tie but usually a blazer and always a white shirt. Year ago he decided to, as he put it, “show himself in public” in white shirts almost exclusively. “No doubt the purified aspect.”) “I like luxury,” said Ellena once, “although I have no use for signs of status.” He considered this statement, turned it over in his head. Then he recast the proposition. “I’m not *interested* in luxury, but I’m interested in the quality of life that is led by people who are interested in luxury.” This was much more precise and, thus, pleased him.

The name Ellena means “the Greek,” and though as far as he knows he isn’t, he certainly looks like he carries the genetics of the Aegean. He is neither tall nor short. He possesses thick, slightly wavy Mediterranean black hair, which is becoming chalked, and the confidence of a man who is conscious of being handsome. Ellena, people said to each other, never had trouble pleasing women. *Ellena n’a jamais de problème pour séduire les femmes.* Sartre once explained why he preferred the company of women: “First of all, there is the physical element. There are of course ugly women, but I prefer those who are pretty.”

They drank a bottle of local white with a smokey-woody taste, and Wargnier ordered *rouge de Loire*, much riper and fuller. To Ellena’s mind, Gautier and Wargnier made it clear he’d have the right to go in whatever direction he wanted with the position of perfumer.

They didn’t, according to Ellena, talk at dinner about Jean-Michel Duriez, the in-house perfumer at the house of Jean Patou, and they didn’t talk about Jean-Paul Guerlain “because he wasn’t really present anymore.” They talked about Chanel, about Jacques Polge, but Chanel was not, they decided, the model they wanted to follow. “I know nothing of Polge himself,” said Ellena. “All I know are the products, and I find them creative and reasonable. *C’est pas du délire.* It’s not crazy brilliance. He is of his time. But they’re good. They’re good. What he makes, what he puts out, it’s ...” He applauded with a silent look, then said, “*Je n’ai rien à dire.*” Nothing more to say.

They asked him how he perceived Hermès. He said he found the products generous in the Mediterranean style, and pure and sophisticated in the Japanese manner. They said, smiling, “*On se retrouve.*” We’ve got a match. He agreed. He told them that his perfumes were constructed like that, and what he would make for them would be generous, no intrigue, no labyrinth. You had to say, “Ah, that smells good!” That’s Mediterranean. And the way you created them, that had to be methodical. A perfume must be completely thought through

Ellena told them, you had to think every angle, and *then* you started building. Impeccable materials. No matter the cost. Thought applied to the most sublime materials. Wargnier ordered coffee, and they talked into the night.

At the end of April they sent the contract.

Ellena thought about all the future commissions he would not have from Gucci and Givenchy and all the other luxury houses. Then he thought about Hermès. He said yes. It was the Annunciation of the luxury world.



The announcement of Ellena's appointment was made by Hermès on May 5, 2004, to go in effect June 7. Everyone in Paris had a comment (New York noted it and went back to its business lunches), though since it was Paris all the comments were off the record and many were tinged, overtly or not, with venom. "It's excellent to take Jean-Claude," said one young perfumer, who cleared his throat, squinted at the sky, and added primly, "I'm almost jealous."

They were openly admiring ("They couldn't do better than Jean-Claude," the perfumer Calice Becker said, "an excellent perfumer passionate about his métier and uncompromising on materials"). They were acid ("How nice that Jean-Claude will get to do even more of his favorite thing: talking to reporters"). They were envious ("Can you imagine the *freedom*?"). They were thoughtful, analytical ("Jean-Louis was very smart about this, and you watch they're going to start increasing market share").

The young hotshot perfumer Francis Kurkdjian commented: "For his career it's really *une belle consécration de travail*"—a beautiful acknowledgment of his work. "And a house like Hermès. Well. A true perfumer has an expertise bigger than smelling. He does everything. You think about François Coty; he decided it all, the perfume, the bottle, the ads. Jean-Claude will be able to create a true aesthetic for the house. To know their history and tell their stories in scent."

The industry discussed his putative salary in the way the French always discuss salaries: as if the KGB were listening. A huge rainmaker perfumer at the Geneva-based Big Boy Firmenich like Alberto Morillas, who landed the biggest commissions from the biggest houses, who sold tons of Firmenich's expensive captive molecules and brought in millions, must be making €300,000 a year. Surely Jean-Louis was paying at least that. It was universally agreed that Hermès's taking someone in-house was Good for the Industry. But Ellena? He was a star, like Jacques Cavallier (who had created the lovely *Chic*, the monster hit *L'Eau d'Issey*, the monster miss but utterly brilliant *Le Feu d'Issey*). Or Kurkdjian (*Armani Mania*, *Le Male*). Or Becker (*J'adore*, *Beyond Paradise*). And he had a star's usual partisans and critics and detractors. All this was intensified with Ellena because he was a darling of the media, with whom he was famous for having a *discours de parfum*. Reporters could talk to him. He could talk back. To the degree to which this was rare, in part it was the perfumers, who were not groomed for microphones, and in part the paranoid, control-freak designers, whose dogma was maintaining the official fiction that they created their own scents. They liked perfumers to be kept in cages in dark rooms. This was why some perfumers liked the fact that Ellena spoke.

Naturally there was also bitter commentary—vindictive jealousy is, like *beurre blanc*, French speciality—usually punctuated, after a careful glance over the shoulder, with the stab of a hot cigarette. “I don’t think he’s the best perfumer in the world,” said a competitor, “but he’s one who has a thinking about perfumery. He presents himself as the heir of Edmond Roudnitska.” Yes, the competitor acknowledged, Ellena had worked under the master. In a frown, a moment’s distraction while jabbing the cigarette briskly over an ashtray. “Roudnitska’s son did that thing recently. For Frédéric Malle? You’ve smelled it? Yes, yes, but not pretty much without interest.” Back to the subject: “Now Roudnitska, *he spoke* about perfume creation, and few perfumers talk about what they do. Or are even capable of it. Jean-Claude can. So. You know.” He took a drag, exhaled a filthy cloud. “Bravo. Or whatever.”

There was derision. “I don’t have a big appreciation for him actually,” the creator of several legendary perfumes sniffed. “His behavior is not greatly appreciated by many people.” His behavior? “Ellena has a good reputation with important people but not with people in the perfume industry. He’s a version of a celebrity chef, a media whore, which everyone tries to become today because the world is now based on the media where *autrefois* the perfumer simply focused on his work and *le plan créatif*.”

It was the standard critique. The Japanese may have evolved the expression “The protruding nail gets hammered down,” but it is as profoundly French as pessimism. “I won’t discuss Ellena,” one dowager of the French industry and creator of several classic perfumes sniffed. “He’s a showman.”

But others took a more philosophical approach. “Grasse is a complicated tribe,” said a middle-aged perfumer. “There’s a real *mafia grasse*. You need to understand, for example, that Françoise Caron is the sister of Olivier Cresp, and Françoise is also the ex-wife of Pierre Bourdon.” (Caron is the creator of *Eau d’Orange Verte* for Hermès, Ungaro’s *Apparition*, and Armani’s *Acqua di Ciò*, Cresp made *Dune Pour Homme* for Dior and Dolce & Gabbana’s *Light Blue*, and Bourdon authored *Iris Poudre* for Frédéric Malle, Dior’s *Dolce Vita*, and Cool Water for Davidoff’s blockbuster. All three are among the most important perfumers in the industry. “Henri Robert, Chanel’s second in-house perfumer and author of the brilliant *Chanel 19*, is the uncle of Guy Robert, creator of *Dioressence* and *Calèche*, who is father of François Robert of *Lanvin Vetyver*. Bernard Ellena, the brother, authored many of the Benetton perfumes, and Céline Ellena, the daughter, is a perfumer as well. These are things you know if you know that tribe.

“And the mothers there! *Putain!* ‘My son got a Dior commission.’ ‘Well, my son got the new Cerruti.’ ‘Mine won the latest Yves Saint Laurent and drives a BMW.’ Et cetera. Grasse is a tiny little town, and the kids leave for Paris to seek their fortunes. Jean-Claude is *grasso* and so they all know him, and when you understand that, you understand everything. Jean-Claude knows how to talk about perfume, and the press is desperate for that, and I’m sorry, but if other perfumers are jealous it’s because very few perfumers can talk about perfume. ‘I put jasmine in rose.’ Well, OK, so what the fuck does that mean. Nothing! And someone comes and explains it, and suddenly he’s a media whore? Please.”

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