

PLEASURES

A Matter of Dollars and Scents

by James Brady

"She's got an indiscreet voice," I remarked. "It's full of—" I hesitated. "Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly.

WHAT GATSBY thought he heard in Daisy's voice is what any number of ambitious people sense they are sure to find in perfume, that it is "full of money." In biblical times aromatic gums and woods, the precursors of perfume, were expensive and coveted as gifts. The Magi carried myrrh and frankincense—along with the more simply attainable gold—to the Christ Child. Ambergris, produced by the endangered whale, and one of the principal fixatives in contemporary perfumes, is reckoned by weight to be second only to the pearl as the most precious product of the sea. Cleopatra worshipped fragrances, the Crusaders brought them to Europe from sacked Saracen towns, and Catherine de' Medici brought, like a dowry, her passion for perfume to France when she married Henry II.

Since then, and very much until now, the French literally *were* the perfume business. And for good reason.

There is, after all, something deliciously wicked about perfume, something decadent, something not quite *comme il faut*. One cannot conceive of the Dutch, or the Baltics, making such a fetish of it. Perfume was whispered to possess aphrodisiac qualities. French bedroom farce rarely was permitted to go on without at least one scene turning dramatically on a lingering trace of scent in the wrong *chambre*. And since, as the English would have it, the French are not overly fond of bathing, perfume became essential to gracious living.

Then there was geography. For reasons only chemists and horticulturists can explain, the best essential oils used in the manufacture of contemporary perfume derive from one colorful little plot of arable land in the south of France near Grasse.

It is at Grasse that the most exotic

ritual of the whole exotic trade is observed: The flowers that produce the oil are harvested at night—once by lantern, now by floodlight—while the petals are still heavy with dew. Once the dawn breaks, the flowers lose as much as 20 percent of their strength. Just after midnight, open trucks, old Citroëns, and "*deux chevaux*" roll out toward the farms transporting men and women, and often children, with burlap sacks, which they will fill with petals. The farmers will pay the workers by the sack and in turn sell the bags to merchants.

The petals are then dumped into a vat or still where the oils are distilled out through the use of solvents, heat, or pressure. The next step is adding a fixative to hold the fragrance together. Musk and civet, the latter produced from the sweat glands of the civet cat, and the rare ambergris are the principal ones used. The final step is to dilute both oils and fixatives in alcohol. Grain alcohol is usually the carrier in which the oils and the fixatives reach the consumer.

The strongest, most concentrated and lasting essence is perfume. It is the most expensive of the whole range of fragrance. While total U.S. sales of all forms of fragrance easily exceed a billion dollars a year, perfume sales account for about only 10 percent of the total, or just over \$100 million. But it is a profitable hundred million.

Toilet water is next in strength to true perfume. It is less pricey and can be splashed about somewhat more liberally without scaring the horses.

Cologne, the lightest form of fragrance, is also the cheapest, and experts allow that it can be used "lavishly." This class of scent was developed in and around Cologne, Germany, in the 17th century.

Toilet waters, colognes, and a less significant form of fragrance medium, the *sachet*, make up about 90 percent of the business in this country. The ratio may be changing in favor of the more expensive perfumes.

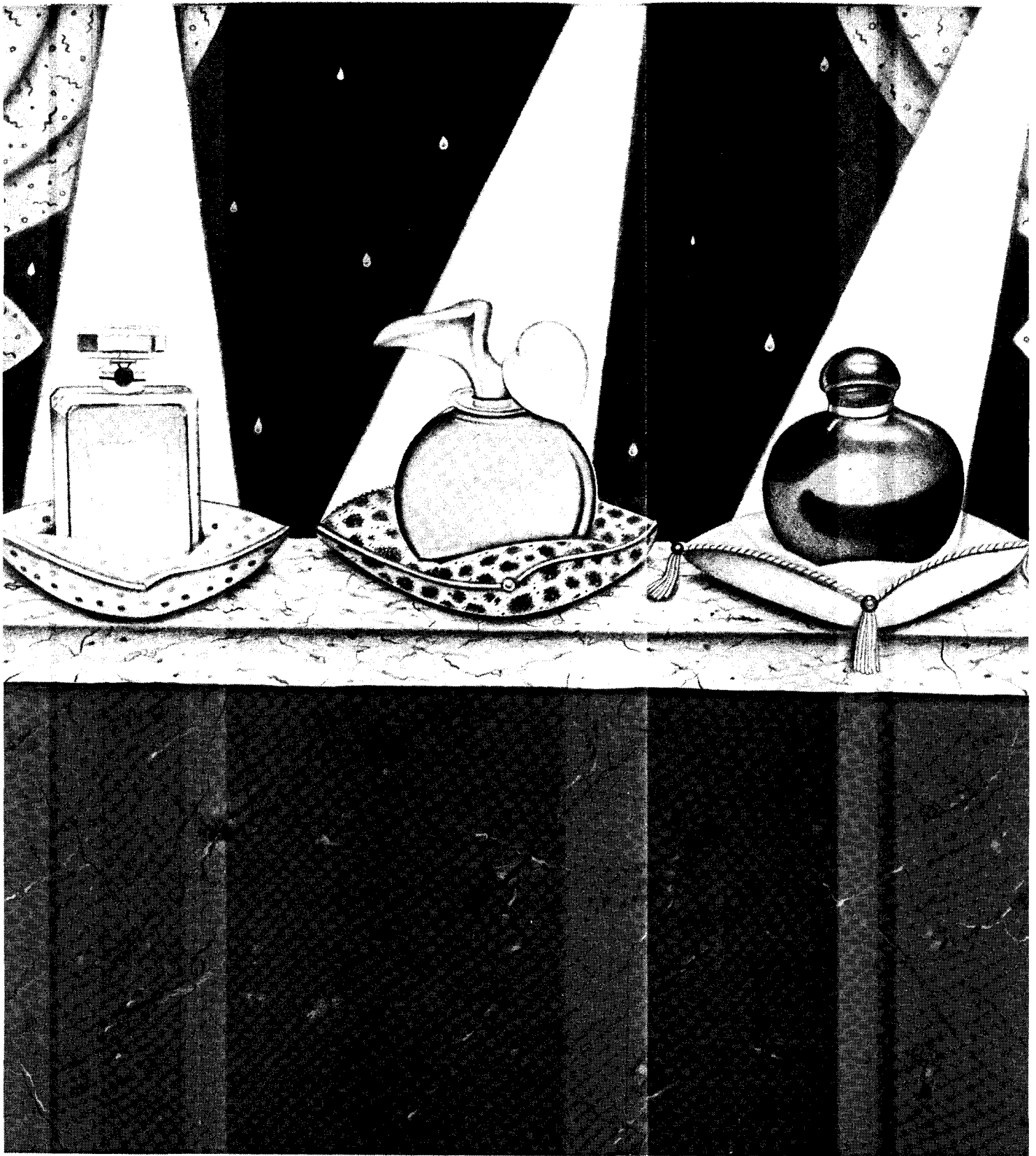
I can no more explain why Grasse produces the best flowers than I can tell why one Rothschild vineyard yields a "*grand vin*," and a bit of ground a quarter-mile away produces an ordinary table red. Soil composition, rainfall, the angle at which the sun strikes the ground and for how many hours, the wind, drainage, the diligence of the individual farmer—these are all important factors.

Experts report, astoundingly, that not France but Bulgaria produces the best roses. *Bulgaria*? But Grasse has just about everything else: the quite good *roses de mai*, jasmine, bitter orange, moss.

And, of course, the tradition. In Paris to the north, there are the flamboyant personalities, imagination, and "names" who turn the wonderful flowers from a commodity into a worldwide trade.

The couture designers of Paris are the rare botanicals of fashion. They may be venal, stupid, and perverted or saintly, modest, and literate. They are never, never dull, and there is in all of them the spark of imagination, the sense of timing and color, the instincts of all creative people.

The great Paris couturiers realized years ago that the real money wasn't in designing clothes but in bottling and selling perfumes under their own labels. Coco Chanel, as in so many things, was one of the pioneers. With a Swiss businessman backing her (the French *never* risk their own money on anything!), Chanel created and launched her famous Chanel No. 5. A shrewd businesswoman (a French banker once paid her the supreme compliment, "Mademoiselle knows the value of a safe 9 percent"), Chanel became rich on the perfume royalties while jealously reserving the right to blackguard her Swiss backer. I once asked her about the backer's son, then 50 years old. "He should be in *l'école maternelle* (nursery school) where there would be someone to blow his nose," Coco declared contemptuously.



Dave Calver

But there was more to the French perfume mystique than this rather endearing Gallic contempt for the Swiss in general and for financiers in particular.

The cost of hand labor, of fabric, of fringe benefits, coupled with the shrinking number of women willing to submit to the ordeal of being fitted, along with the improvement and growth of the ready-to-wear business

on Seventh Avenue—and around the world—have made couture, or custom-made women's clothes, an expensive anachronism.

Twice a year the Paris couturiers show their clothes to the press, to professional buyers, and to a few rich and leisured women, to stimulate sales of their cheaper-to-produce *prêt-à-porter*, and to grab the headlines, the covers of

Vogue and *Harper's Bazaar*, the front pages of *Women's Wear Daily*. Here the resultant publicity, at least theoretically, will push sales of their \$60-an-ounce perfume. It is a case of perfume tail wagging dressmaker dog.

The publicity fallout can linger, like a cheap *eau de cologne*, a long, long time. The fashion house of Jean Patou, no longer a source of creative fashion, still

prosper from sales of its Joy (at one time the most expensive perfume in the world). And the Maison Jeanne Lanvin, its greatness also behind it, gloried for years in its classic Arpège.

The younger and currently more influential Parisian designers quickly learned the trick. Yves Saint-Laurent, today quite clearly the commissar of the Paris fashion *apparat*, followed the example of Chanel and created his own line of perfume.

At both extremes of the Paris spectrum, the designers were buying flowers in Grasse and putting up, like frugal New England homemakers, batches of expensive scent with their names on the bottle.

Balenciaga, the austere Spaniard whose fashion house was more like a monastery with his assistants scurrying about silently in clerical smocks, also went into the perfume trade. He reportedly was so shy of publicity that each afternoon, at the close of work, he crawled into a panel truck in the courtyard of his fashion establishment and was driven home, lying on the floor, lest he be photographed by one of the swarming paparazzi.

So, too, a curious young man named Karl Lagerfeld is now marketing a scent. Unlike Balenciaga, Karl loves the press. He recently told an interviewer that at the age of four, when his mother asked him what he wanted for his birthday, he replied: "A valet." Lagerfeld is also the man so taken by the broad-shouldered vogue in women's fashions that he has ordered shoulder pads to be sewn into his own T-shirts.

The French understand the business. A successful couture collection next January by Givenchy, even though it will lose a hundred thousand dollars or more, will get the Givenchy name into the "style" pages of the newspapers and on the covers of the magazines. For the next few months stores like Bloomingdale's, Saks, and Neiman-Marcus will trumpet their new Givenchy boutiques, and sales of his perfumes, toilet waters, and other fashion appurtenances, such as scarves, jewelry, and stockings, will boom.

But it is in perfume that the true bliss of the bottom line resides.

PERFUME HAS a high retail price and a relatively low cost of manufacture. More money goes into the design and manufacture of the bottle itself than into the contents. Pauline Trigère once told me she spent \$85,000 to design a

bottle and make the mold. As much again can go into the advertising, including the reputed million-dollar fees paid to models such as Margaux Hemingway, Lauren Hutton, and Cheryl Tiegs, and whopping retainers paid photographers Dick Avedon and Hiro.

Now, for the first time, it appears as if the French monopoly is in peril. A whole slew of bright, ambitious young Americans has gotten into the act. Either gambling their own money or backed by conglomerates like Norton Simon Inc., or Warner Communications, or the great pharmaceutical houses of Pfizer and Eli Lilly, youngish designers such as Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Halston, and Mary McFadden are now producing perfumes.

Quel changement! The French used to dominate the trade. And now the upstart Americans are swarming all over them, buying up their perfume companies (as with Saint-Laurent), or starting their own.

It was probably the tough, vulgar, very shrewd, and larger-than-life Charles Revson who was the first American to say the hell with French tradition and to try to do it on his own.

But he worked with the traditional framework, using a "name" designer as a lure. His cosmetics company, Revlon, was already huge and profitable when, in 1968, he created and launched the first perfume bearing the name of a home-grown American designer, Norman Norell.

Norell was then the premier (possibly sharing the laurels with James Galanos) American fashion creator, an alternately gentle and waspish man who would work off nerves brought on by an opening night of his new line of clothes by scrubbing, on his hands and knees, the floors of his Seventh Avenue showroom.

Norell, the perfume, did not precisely knock anyone dead, but the superb Revlon marketing know-how and Charles Revson's own touch with an ad campaign made it a winner.

Revson's archrival, the redoubtable Estée Lauder (their feuds are legendary and Andy Tobias in *Fire and Ice* summarizes them nicely), tooled up her cosmetics empire and put out her perfume. Along came designers like Rudi Gernreich, Oscar de la Renta, Elsa Peretti, Diane von Furstenberg, and John Weitz with their own labels. Corporate heavies like American Cyanamid and Chesebrough-Pond's moved in.

Giants like Revlon are beginning a second generation of perfume market-

ing. Norell, now 10 years old, clearly has peaked and, since the death of Norman Norell, no longer derives a twice-a-year publicity windfall from his fashion collections. Just before his own death in perhaps his last tribute to himself, Charles Revson developed a younger, less expensive perfume called Charlie. Revlon has now gone one step further away from the reliance on a designer "name" by creating a fragrance called Babe.

Babe comes to us principally through the medium of Margaux Hemingway, hired by Revson to disport herself and her generous proportions around swimming pools, on beaches, or in the smoky confines of such *boîtes* as Studio 54, while, presumably, wearing a dash of Babe.

At which point, visions of Miss Hemingway dancing in my fevered head, I pause for a parenthetical insertion: The experts at the Fragrance Foundation, an industry propaganda group, inform us that perfume and *sweat* are just dandy together; that, in their words, "When you dance, the added heat of your body will give your perfume even greater excitement. What a way to make the scene and be beautifully remembered!"

Turning rapidly from that page of their brochure lest I become overstimulated, I consulted Wall Street experts. None of the financial houses expects the perfume business to do anything but grow over the next 10 years. They cite rising disposable income among the female population, a greater number of distributive outlets, increased and more seductive advertising by rival brands.

So a whole new raft of perfume millionaires can be expected to blossom, mostly young Americans with reputations solidly anchored in fashion design, following in the footsteps of Coty, Lanvin, Patou, Chanel. Rich and beautiful women will bless them for producing such treasures, harried husbands on Christmas Eve will pant silent thanks for providing "the perfect gift," which, however expensive, is simple to buy and doesn't weigh much. ●

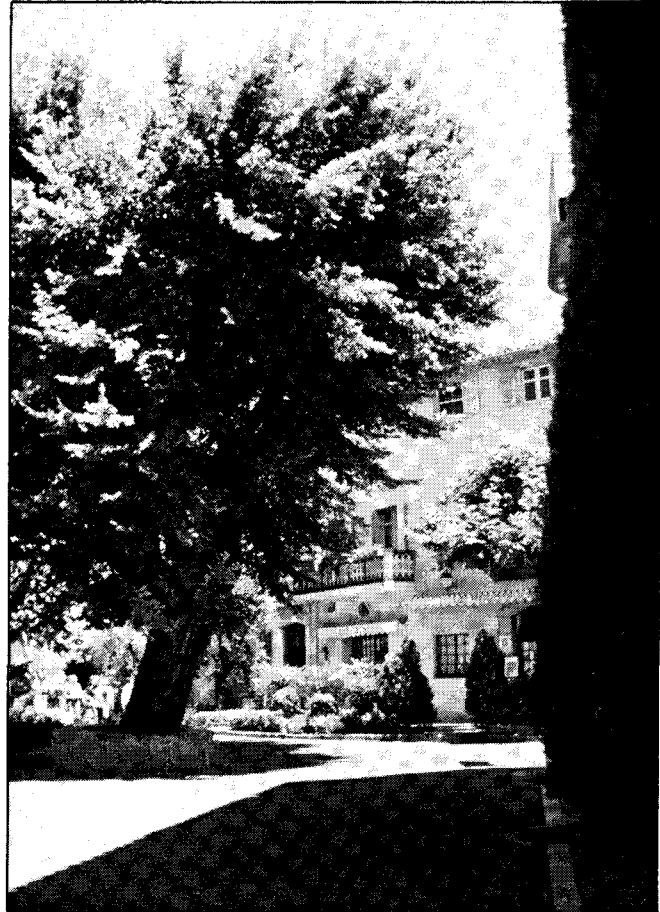
James Brady, former publisher of Women's Wear Daily and editor of New York magazine, is a novelist whose last book, Paris One, now a Dell paperback, deals with intrigues in the French perfume and fashion métier. His next novel, which Putnam's will publish this fall, is Nielsen's Children, about American television.

BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

Cruising the Riviera Green Belt

by Horace Sutton

Barbara Gillam



Mougins looking alpsward, left, and in the picture-book village, right—"It could claim the 'Cordon Bleu' of the Côte d'Azur."

THE MORNING WOULD bloom bright and cool in the hills above Cannes and you knew the sun would be splashing the Iles de Lérins, washing the beach of the Croisette where the film bunnies disport before the paparazzi when the film festival is on in May. The dawn would be sending shafts of gold into the Vieux Port where the few fishermen who are left must jockey for space with the big yachts that park there during the summer months so that their passengers can play baccarat or trente-et-quarante at the Palm Beach Casino, hit tennis balls on the 10 courts of the Hotel Montfleury, or make the pilgrimage to the Moulin à Mougins, that culinary temple not far from the autoroute La Provençal, the speedway that starts on the heights behind Nice and scurries above the Riviera watering holes on its breathless way to Marseilles.

On mornings like these, all the

Riviera spreads before you like a splendid buffet dazzling the eye and confusing the senses. One can explore the blue belt which is the coastline—Juan-les-Pins, Cannes, Sainte-Maxime, Saint-Tropez, and the Bay of the Angels that embraces Nice itself in a giant loop that runs from Antibes to elegant Cap Ferrat. Sainly and angelic place-names, plucked from the pages of Fitzgerald, where bronzing bodies are displayed in fashions that are neither saintly nor exactly angelic.

Above the coastline is the magnificence of the green belt, the surrounding hills, sprinkled with medieval towns, with *pieds-à-terre* where artists of international renown have come to paint, with museums where their works repose—Picasso and Chagall, Renoir and Braque, Léger and Matisse. And if that doesn't suit there is Valberg and there is Beuil, flower-filled pasturelands in summer, but ski resorts in winter, a white belt 100 kilometers from

the water-girt frenzy of Cannes.

One morning we forsook the twin pools of the Montfleury, the tennis courts and the promise of a grand cold table at noon, and pointed the little Peugeot down the Boulevard Montfleury to the Boulevard de la République and found the Avenue de Vallauris which is an old road that leads to Vallauris, city of potters. More than 100 of them are at work there, including the master ceramicist Roger Capron who produces tableaux as well as practical dishware, all in high style. Works by craftsmen good and bad—whose antecedents worked clay for centuries—are spread on the sidewalks of one long street. There was a revival toward the end of the 19th century that elevated pottery making to a fine art. Then, after a somnolence that lasted until the end of World War II, Pablo Picasso arrived and turned it all around. There, in a 12th-century chapel, he painted his own "War and Peace," a pair of composi-