

Five doors of perceptions: 1. Scent

by mazaher

October, 2011

::

scent, noun: 1. a distinctive odor, especially when agreeable. 2. an odor left in passing, by means of which an animal or person may be traced. 3. a track or trail as or as if indicated by such an odor. 4. perfume. 5. the sense of smell.

::

John

The day they met, John almost missed it. He'd been inhaling the familiar smell of St. Bart's -- surgical spirit, bandage gauzes, formaldehyde, lysoform, a bitter touch of tamed iodine, and the faintest stench of biological waste in the background-- and he didn't consciously take notice.

But his nose did, and so his archaic brain, trained to razor-sharp awareness on Afghan battlefields: there was a thin trace of something else mixed in, something as out of place in a lab at Bart's as a Sheffield blade on a muck-heap or angel wings in Southwark.

John found himself thinking of freshly pressed linen bedsheets, of lilies, and of heights. He thought of geometry and the cool neatness of prime numbers, and how all those disparate things somehow fit with the puzzling man with the colourless eyes, who seemed to know about his personal history almost more than John knew himself.

There was a longing left in the air after the man --Sherlock Holmes-- winked and closed the door behind himself. John ascribed it to the mixed hopes hanging on this unexpected chance to stay on in London... Hopes, those uncomfortable guests, knocking on the door and asking to be put up for the night after he had given up on them. He wrote the feeling down as an unwanted byproduct of trying to cope with yet another jolt in his plans, although a promising one for once, and didn't think about it again until bedtime.

He lay for a long time on his narrow bed, staring at the ceiling, letting the heat from the radiator on the wall seep into his aching leg. Then he turned off the light and stared some more in the darkness. Then he fell asleep, and dreamed of snow.

Sherlock

Atkinson's English Lavender. Sherlock catalogued the information together with the other items crowding in the usual swarm of incoming information: 5'6", inexpensive but efficient jacket, dark blue-green eyes, uneven tan (obvious deductions attached), pale hair, partial ankylosis in left shoulder (bullet wound? shrapnel?), intermittent limp, sensible shoes, and a cell-phone with a story.

Strange that what made up his mind about wanting this man as a flatmate was not the army background nor the determined dignity of his bearing, but the scent of his cologne. It stood up among the ubiquitous whiffs of cheap, sandal-scented "fragrances for men" like a well-tended garden among ruins. It made him think about his late uncle Sigward, who had given him his first magnifying glass and who brought with him a thin, perpetual aroma of Atkinson's English Lavender.

Uncle Sigward had died of a heartstroke when Sherlock was five, and Sherlock had found himself in unprecedented trouble when at three in the night he'd made his way to the room where the body had been laid, in order to see whether the eyelids had indeed remained close. He'd made a point of forgetting about uncle Sigward after the incident, therefore his reaction now was to turn tail and run. By tomorrow, he'd surely have regrouped, carefully brought his unruly memories back in hand, and made himself impervious to olfactory suggestions from the man he already labeled as his new flatmate-- or rather, his first and only flatmate, as he'd been living quite alone on Montague Street.

Sherlock didn't dream that night, for the simple reason that he couldn't sleep at all.



John

So it was Sherlock. The second time it met the scent, that evening on the pavement outside 221b, John's nose held on to it and didn't let go. *This*, it told him in its ancient wordless language, **this* is good. This is true, and trusted, and just right for you. Don't let it go.* And John didn't. There was something incongruous in the scent. John would have expected Sherlock to wear ...more of a statement, as far as cologne went; something like vetiver, so shamelessly invasive, showing off its piercing perfection to one and all. Infuriating, darkly brilliant, sticking to clothes and minds, unforgettable. But what he found was completely unexpected. Most people wear scent in order to disguise some facet of themselves, and accent some other. They wear it like an armour, or a power suit, or make-up, or hairstyle: part of a constructed image. But Sherlock's cologne seemed to reveal more than it concealed. It mixed inextricably with the man's personal scent: the warm, clean, slightly salted aroma John barely caught raising from the open collar of his shirt. The combination felt oddly abstract, as though the body which carried it was no more than a letter or a strange symbol traced by pen on paper, and the meaning was all in the scent. Not in the long lithe body and the sharp searing mind he saw going through crime scenes and decay, waste and hate and death, with a strange sort of invulnerable, inhuman innocence. That scent of air and light was in John's nostrils when he took aim and pressed the trigger to kill a man, later that night.



Sherlock

Home. Irrelevant as it was, John's scent made him think of home. Not the more or less gilded cage from which he had taken care to escape at the earliest opportunity. Surely not anything which had to do with his family of origin. But rather, details --a particular shape of indoor spaces, the way the early morning light slanted in through a window, the Brownian dance of dust particles, the whirr of the fridge turning itself on in the kitchen, the square glass bottle with the round label on the bathroom dresser-- which he suddenly realised had been missing from his life. A different step on the floorboards. Another's voice humming in the shower. But there was more than that to John. There was the patience with which a man who knows his own faults all too well faces the faults of others. An unusual tolerance for most of what life or people could throw his way. A will of steel, backed up by unexpected strength. All in a compact, unassuming, unpreposterous package. Like Dr. John Watson had nothing to prove to anybody, except maybe himself.

It must be the season, he'd thought at first. *Winter coming on, rooms cosier with someone else in them.* Still, he'd never felt the urge to "tidy things up a bit" for anyone before. And when he'd made his way in haste out of the door, leaving the new house implement sitting uncomfortably in the bad armchair, he'd barely reached the front door before something had been pulling him back in and up the stairs. *Not just a house implement, then.* Atkinson's English Lavender had never smelled so dangerous.

::

Note: Sherlock is wearing *White Linen* by Estée Lauder, unusual but not unheard of as a men's cologne. *Atkinson's English Lavender* was a common choice for men born in the first half of the XX century, before the fashion for sandalwood took root back in the early '70. The trademarks belong of course to the respective Companies, and I mention them here because I personally like (and occasionally use) both fragrances.