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Fleurs de Bulgarie

by Gill Hilton

What I create is beyond words. To call it scent is scant and cheap; the word 'perfume' is effete. For what I do is crush, steam and dissolve. And then I resurrect. I drown the petals of roses to give them life again. I grind down root and bark until they give up their atoms for me to rebuild. In my hands the bergamot orange weeps her zest for my alchemy. And I wait. Oh, I wait.

Inside their glass casket these essences converse, like the souls of the dead. And what they can tell you is both dark and heavenly. Should you be a patron of my magic, you could lay out bare upon your skin the fruits of my passion. Primal particles for you to pass on. A neural message to those who can appreciate. I do nothing less than take the Earth's memories and turn them into expectations for you to share.

By 1858 my business was blossoming. I could hardly get enough of what I needed. What Mother Earth keeps contained she does not always let go of easily. Her folds and dips take some straddling and burrowing. Yet I have, through my life, bottled her secrets. I have carefully conjured them into liquids that can turn into air as thick as syrup. Inseparable from the oxygen that you breathe. Prepared and waiting to join your senses before you even realise.

It was with the greatest of these treasures that I landed in London on a wintry autumn evening. An autumn trying to creep forward from that city's dreadful summer. A burning summer that had, I'm told, reeked of Hell. The shrunken Thames had been force-fed with man-made effluent; it had guttered and evacuated itself. Before that tide of turds could be turned London's lungs were filled with molecules of putrefaction.

And on that dank evening I almost retched as I disembarked into the residual miasma of that human waste. Almost immediately I was adrift in a flow of rank humanity and its trappings. Carts, cattle, horses and children. And all their discharge. A stinking, clamouring, splattering, pestilent river of apparently pointless life.

Suddenly my precious liquid seemed poorly protected inside my case. A hair's breadth from seeping away. A fracture away from disaster. My *Fleurs de Bulgarie*. Roses from Bulgaria. A flower dear to anyone's heart, from a place as exotic as Venus. I had studied my client's penchants and this would, I felt I knew, reach inside her senses and once there, fix itself.

So many reasons to hurry on to my lodgings and comfort myself as best I could in this foul city. My anticipation of tomorrow's meeting tasted sweet and sharp; an antithesis to all around me now. A ripe reward for my tenacity. The thrill of chasing a transaction that would seal up my good fortune, bottle it tight. Tonight in my room I would practice my slow, low bow, and rehearse the tone of my reverent words: 'Your Majesty...'