

Fragrance: What's In A Memory?

By Zoe Birdsall

The mossy, sea-salt smell that takes you back to a windswept pebble beach in Eastbourne; the rich, comforting scent of a new leather bag purchased in the bustling souks of Marrakesh; the fresh, citrus zing of a perfect lemon picked in a Sorrento lemon tree grove - something so small as a spritz of perfume has the power to evoke memories you thought you had forgotten.

For me, this is what makes the world of perfumery so special; how a tiny bottle can recapture a memory, itself bottled up somewhere inside you.

Rose holds a special place in my heart; soft, delicate, romantic rose. Sitting on a bench in a cemetery, next to my grandma's memorial stone, this is where I am brought back to when I smell a perfume with notes of rose.

It was early May when my grandma passed away, and nestled in the corner of an eerie graveyard is a beautiful, stoned rose garden scattered with memorial plaques amongst the bushes; a slice of colourful beauty hidden away in a bleak sea of grey.

Sit. Close your eyes. Breathe in. A sweet, fragrant, powdery aroma fills my nostrils.

Each week, sometimes twice, I went to this serene spot over the following few months and on each visit the familiar smell would greet me like an old friend; such a distinctly sweet, hypnotic scent. For that time, nature's perfume was my comfort blanket, an escape - if only for a moment.

As time went on, their fragrance changed. In the summer rain: dewy, subtle. On a hot day: fruity and aromatic. And as they started to die a rich, musky aroma permeated the air.

A squirt of Jo Malone Red Roses takes me back to that spring and the smell of young roses - fresh, hypnotic and delicately sweet. Droplets of Acqua Di Parma Rosa Nobile conjures memories of the garden in full bloom, elegant and soft with its top notes of mandarin and bergamot accentuating and lifting the floral middle notes of peony, violet, lily and of course rose. And a dabble of Tom Ford Café Rose, which encapsulates a more sophisticated, vintage, intense rose, reminds me of the flowers as they started to wilt, with spicier notes of saffron, black pepper and incense.

And with each note comes something more: a single Valentine's red rose, a vibrant pink bunch for my 21st birthday – a whirlwind trip down memory lane brought to focus through rose-tinted spectacles.

I see this special relationship between fragrance and memories every day in my work, as equally for male scents as women's. When passing around a bottle of Sancti Liquides Imaginaires, one colleague was instantly taken back to sitting in church during their annual school Christmas service. The rich notes – citrus bergamot, spicy nutmeg and cardamom, earthy myrrh and woody cedar contribute to this memory sending them back to sitting in the pews, taking in the smell of rich incense, old wood and spicy candles.

And this is what makes perfumery so fascinating and special - that one scent can hold a different meaning for each and every person.

Nothing can change the past, but by wearing perfume we can remember it and carry it with us.

Words: 536