

JOURNEY INTO LIGHT

VOL DE NUIT BY GUERLAIN

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Vol de Nuit, a masterpiece from 1933 that is still in production, is perhaps the house of Guerlain's most difficult, troubling, and mysterious perfume. Of the handful of still extant creations by Jacques Guerlain, it is this scent "Night Flight" based on a delicate and poetic novel by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, that is the most unreachable and impenetrable of his perfumes: strange, distant, opaque.

Where the heart of *Après L'Ondée*, from 1906 (wistful, exquisite, a sigh of melancholic longing in its heliotrope and violet-touched rain-drop transparency) does wear its heart on its sleeves and is all the more vulnerable and beautiful for it, and *L'Heure Bleue* (1912) a delectable confectioner's joy suffused with more melancholic, crepuscular consciousness, is never really afraid to emote, Vol de Nuit is held back; shadowy, and wary. Where we are quite sure of Mitsouko's mossed, woodland austerity, its almost grave and ceremonious beauty, or the unmistakably voluptuous, volatile immediacy of Shalimar (released in the heady hedonism of the roaring twenties and destined for bare-shouldered odalisques) we will find no such sureties with Vol de Nuit. Her very essence, her intentions, are concealed. This is a perfume that resists interpretation. It is pure enigma.

Yet mysteries are there to be solved; at the very least explored. And when we look deeper into the background of this perfume, at the circumstances that shaped its creation, the cultural and artistic influences that inspired Jacques Guerlain to try and capture these ideas in scent, we find that although the secrets of Vol de Nuit can never be completely prised apart (and we surely wouldn't want them to be), a fuller understanding of the perfume's story does further enhance the pleasure of wearing a scent that is, for myself and many other aficionados, quite simply one of the most beautiful ever made.

Vol de Nuit was released at a very dark time in world history. Storm clouds of fascism were rising, presaging the unimaginable horrors that were soon to besiege Europe and the rest of the world. It was the year that Hitler came to power; that the Reichstag was burned down; that the first concentration camps were opened in East Europe. It was also the Great Depression: the entire continent was in economic crisis, and Parisians were literally freezing to death in the streets in one of the coldest winters in memory. Although just three years earlier in 1929, Jean Patou had released the decadently floracious Joy, the "most expensive perfume ever", the mood was now very different, darker, more ruminative. Vol de Nuit somehow embodies this smell of thoughtful, bitter, uncertainty; of compression; of something internalized and foreboding.

It is also, despite all this, a perfume of celebration, and herein lies the beauty of its contradictions. 1933 was the year that an aeroplane first flew over the peaks of Mount Everest, that flight truly captured the world's imagination, and the perfume itself was named after the novel written by Jacques Guerlain's close friend and confidant, Antoine de Saint Exupery – a dashing, brave, almost reckless romantic who was one of the first masters of aeronautics, flying multiple missions for Aeropostale France, as well as quite dangerous sorties for the resistance during World War II. He was also an aristocrat, a womaniser, bon viveur, and writer; author of the one of the most popular books ever written in France, *Le Petit Prince*, as well as several other novels, often centred on the thrills and dangers of aviation.

I recently came across an old and battered English version of this book in a second hand bookshop, and was quite fascinated to discover some of the parallels between the novel, with its ambiguities, strange depths, and poetical insights and its translation, by Jacques Guerlain, the following year, into perfume. This is a lonely story; pilots, wrenched from the comforts of their domestic lives, manning their aircraft through the dangers of the skies, at night, often without sufficient flight instruments to guarantee safety, something that was considered overly dangerous by many and that had only recently been attempted for the first time.

"This man must enter the inmost heart of night, that clothed darkness",

we hear of the main protagonist, as he flies over the mountain ranges of Patagonia, Brazil, and Uruguay, carrying the post of an entire continent, and the hopes of an enterprise, on his shoulders.

The narrative centres on two main characters, Rivière and Fabien. The former is the man responsible for coordinating his pilots and ensuring the prompt punctuality of his deliveries. He is a serious and duty-bound man, hard-working yet sensitive, quite keenly aware of his guilt in pushing his aviators into dangerous situations even when he knows the risks. The latter is the young and fearless pilot, just married, who leaves his wife behind in Buenos Aires, and, traversing the vast swathes of land beneath

him, subsumed in the dark cradle of night, is tragically caught in a cyclone that leads him, eventually, to an almost mythical death among the stars, beautifully described by Saint Exupery in ways that bring to mind the sun-dazzled demise of Icarus.

At the beginning of the novel, however, Fabien is full of hope. We feel the interior of the plane, its shell, “the mystery of metal turned to living flesh”, as he “lets his neck sink back into the leather padding and feel into the deeply meditative mood of flight, mellow with inexplicable hopes”. Where Caron’s En Avion, a precursor to Vol de Nuit, deftly takes the cool leather smell of the cockpit’s interior and its wooden dashboard rather more literally in its arid, violet-flecked propriety, Vol de Nuit encapsulates this “mellow, inexplicable hopefulness” more effectively, perhaps, with its soft, caressing base notes of orris, tonka bean, ambergris, leather, benzoin and vanilla. It’s a beautiful, enveloping, aura of pulverized starlight that lets us fully imagine the gloriously new sensation of drifting almost effortlessly, and timelessly, above the clouds.

In early advertisements for Vol de Nuit, though, the scent is billed as a “perfume of mystery and adventure”. Saint Exupery manned flights over Africa, particularly Dakar and the Congo, and some of this exoticism is captured in the famous zebra print of the felt-lined inner box the perfume is packaged in, the bottle itself made in the form of a plane’s propeller. The intrepid masculinity of this golden new age of flight, the propulsion, the fearlessness,

is also an essential part of Vol de Nuit’s androgyny and its sense of potential dangers, as this perfume, at least at the beginning, is anything but easy. In fact its “difficult” nature, its jolie-laide, unbeautiful, almost acrid juxtapositions in the initial stages (which cede, eventually, to that hypnotic veil of milky light that enfathoms the scent once it is fully developed), nevertheless do make the composition quite unapproachable and formidable in some ways when you first apply it. She is geared up, adrenalised, and certainly not to be trifled with.

The olfactive key to this sense of unease, of diffident untouchability, comes from the sharp, almost anti-intuitive clash of bitter green galbanum resin; pungent jonquil absolute, and the piercing, almost musty, scent of petitgrain, pimento and sage, laid elegantly alongside the classic Guerlain citric artillery of bergamot, lemon and orange. Resolutely not beckoning and un-come-thither (in the Shalimar mould), at this stage the perfume is quite assertive and spiky, undercut by a smouldering, growling cinnamon note that suggests daredevils, autonomy, and self-reliance. This is very much the colder side of the perfume, though, both tonally and emotionally, because, as we will find out later, Vol de Nuit is very much a study in contrasts.

Where Jacques Guerlain’s other classic perfumes have a smooth, luxuriant, yet delicate pliancy, Vol de Nuit is fierce (on the surface): solitary. The pilots that we meet in the novel spend many hours, from dawn until dusk flying in hazardous conditions and varying visibility, the cold steel carapace of their planes the only barrier between themselves and the freezing elements, the sky, the winds, and the wintry Andes that loom up from below:

“A snow-bound stillness brooded on the ranges. The winter snow had brought its peace to all this vastness. Only sheer peaks that, flying at twenty thousand feet, you almost graze, straight falling cloaks of stone, an ominous tranquillity. As far as the eye could see, all was at peace. Peaceful, yes, but tense with some dark potency. Dusk began to mingle with the air, rising and hovering, a veil above the snow”.

In presuming that Jacques Guerlain did in fact read the novel that his creation is nominally based on, as a great lover of Vol de Nuit it was fascinating for me to read of these vast, lonely landscapes that make perfect sense in the context of the perfume; the elemental space that surrounds the aircraft also mirroring the initial distancing effect that the perfume effortlessly achieves in its cool, earlier stages. The taut, barbed greenness, the bitter taste of woods, and the unsweetened spice that keep any potential admirers at arm’s length.

Both the novel and the perfume begin with this vital sense of audacity; a yearning for something unexplored; the embracing of adversity. The deeper thrill of this perfume, for me however,



definitely derives from the eventual softening, in the later stages of the scent's progression, when the heart of the perfume is revealed: the soft, dream-like, velvety and sensual embrace of the nocturnal. Vol de Nuit, as its name would suggest, is very much a night perfume. As the notes develop gradually on the skin, a kind of unclasp occurs. The tension relents, and a vanillic veil is slowly drawn over the tableau, tinged with ambergris, the Guerlinade base, and costus: the warm and heart-rending human smell of a lover's hair and skin. At this point there are few perfumes I can think of that are more elusive, drifting, and compellingly, mysteriously erotic. Leaving allusions to the novel aside for a moment, the perfume itself seems to be taking to the air, hovering almost spectrally about its wearer: a woman shivering in fur, crossing the street, on an icy, winter evening. Externally, the moonlight and stars weave webs of diamond clarity as her breath steams the black night air, but as she clutches her perfume-tinged coat close to her and the plush, furred base notes of Vol de Nuit surround her illicitly like a pale-lit halo, it invites the person smelling these perturbing sensations to come closer, in a push-pull, warning/invitation that is invisibly exhilarating. We sense the purring determination in the perfume's outer reaches, but also the emotion; a powdery, embered sexuality like the soft, glowing light coming from beneath a bedroom door at night.

It is for this reason that Vol de Nuit is definitely a perfume that one could become obsessed by, with its impenetrability, its provocation of the desire to know more, especially if it were linked indelibly in one's mind to a lover. No matter how many times you smell it, this quality remains, this ineffable obscurity, and is the one of the reasons, I think, why it is so beloved (vintage Vol de Nuit parfum is something of a holy grail for many perfume lovers). It was also the subject of a short story by writer Takashi Akoda, *Night Flight*, a tragic tale of a grief-stricken man who was possessed by, and literally haunted by the perfume of his deceased lover, a woman whose fragrance came to his room mournfully, yet rapturously every night like a ghost, both soothing and tormenting, that "got its name not from flight, but because a fragrance can become stronger in the darkness. It almost seemed to float on the air..."

Which is surely a feat of perfumery technique not to be taken lightly. Vol de Nuit is a brooding and simmering olfactory presence, a homage to men and women who lived on the steel of their nerves and their sense of adventure, a perfume of its time but also one that is timeless. Presciently, Saint Exupery himself was to have a fate that was eerily similar to Fabien, the pilot whose plane falls into the sea at the end of the novel, as he tries in vain to steer his way out of this "shoreless night, leading to no anchorage" and eventual oblivion. We sense what is going to happen, as the novel progresses. Yet the author keeps us in exquisite suspense right up until the end. We know that the odds are terrifically stacked up

against Fabien, as he battles the elements and tries to keep the plane surging back up into the sky; that the fuel in the engine will soon run out, and that he is surrounded, on all sides and as far as the eye can see, by destructive storms. Yet there is still a great beauty in it all. Despite the imminent peril, we feel the vastness of existence; of human solitude; of love, as he remembers his wife who is waiting anxiously for him in their bedroom at home, the great and overwhelming beauty of the night sky. The young pilot, who could have been Saint Exupery, Amelia Earheart, or any of the pioneers of that uncertain time when a night flight could easily mean death, has, despite these tragic vagaries of fate, nevertheless lived. He has risen above: is on top of the world, literally, and, like the gracious denouement of the perfume and its spellbinding, mystical introspection, has reached some kind of bliss.

"He climbed, and it grew easier to correct the plunges, for the stars gave him his bearings. Their pale magnet drew him up. After that long and bitter quest for light, for nothing in the world would he forgo the frailest gleam.

And now a wonder seized him: dazzled by that brightness, he had to keep his eyes closed for some seconds. He had never dreamt that the night clouds could dazzle thus. But the full moon, and all the constellations, were changing them, now, to waves of light".

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