



# Perfume

LAURIE B. FRANKEL

I am standing next to my stepmother in her kitchen against the back wall counter, looking out the glass slider to the loggia, as she calls it, then onto the back yard, the pool. A fifteen-foot marble Venus, naked on her half shell, stone hair flowing, looks down on my father as he glides, fully clothed, across the waist-high pool, cooling down after a round with the ball machine on the tennis court under the beating sun.

“He walked into my study...” she said.

From where I am standing, if I alternate focus from near to far, my father dives into her head, right where her mouth is, then glides past it—for a split second, feet kicking out her lips.

“...and slams a letter on my desk.”

“What was it?” I ask.

“SPAM!” she yells. She’s intent on being upset, not accurate. I think she means junk mail, but I get what she is saying. I’m trying to keep pace and stay out of her way all at the same time.

On her out breath, alcohol reaches me like a spray of perfume. All these years I, the keeper of logic and truth, had convinced myself it was odd-smelling toothpaste because if that’s what it was then maybe things weren’t so bad.

“Was he testing you?” I ask. I’m just making conversation, because he’s always testing. Always trying to win.

“Yes!” she says, with the force of “SPAM!”

He’s worried, aka paranoid, I gather, she’s going to be taken in by an offer

through junk mail. Give her credit card over the phone to a pencil seller. Something quaint like that. And I think, not her. Not this one. I mean, hardly. He practically raised her, all but re-wired her brain. This woman is afraid to breathe without permission.

She tells me he made her cry, that the next day he said he was sorry.

“I don’t want your apologies,” she says, speaking freely to the swimming man, protected as we are through glass and distance. “Don’t do it in the first place!” she says, as if he can hear her.

After five decades, “sorry” is no more than a nonsensical pairing of letters and sound, overused and wrung out. Even the sad look on her face appears pasted.

He’s swimming back the other way now and she’s still talking, like watching a movie come out of her mouth. I see two of him—stereoscope—the one cooling off some twenty yards before me and the reel going round in my head: walking into her office, letter in hand, smacking the desk till the two moving pictures are one and he dives in through the double doors, surfaces at her chair as her cries fill the pool.

The phone rings. My sister is here. I can see her white car in the gate monitor. She is requesting entry.

My stepmother runs across the room, picks up the phone, and from a small square of white paper with typewritten directions for the new gate system reads aloud, “Dial star 7. The gate will open.” She presses two buttons then steps aside to view the monitor. The car does not advance. She steps back to the phone, re-reads aloud, “Dial star 7.” Punch!, Punch! “The gate will open.” Nothing. She slams down the phone.

My stepmother is running now. Not so much running as darting about as if there’s an emergency and she doesn’t know what to take first. As she advances and retreats she talks about a pad next to the gate proper in case of fake emergencies like this, a way to override the system.

“Do you know what I’m talking about?” she asks, agitating like an old-time washer.

“I get the idea,” I say. “Can I help?”

“Have you done it?” she asks. “Do you know the code?” Her voice is high, demanding.

I shake my head, but I feel up to the challenge and follow behind as she exits

the kitchen.

She turns and, all but pushes back as she says, “No, no, never mind,” as if this is a solo mission for which only she is prepared.

All this time my dad’s still swimming, porpoising now in his long-sleeved button down, long khaki shorts, knee-high socks still on. The curtains on the wall adjacent to the slider are open, too, so I have a full view. He pops up on the other side of the pool and stands now, hat back on his head, shirt pasted, and drags his body forward, hands paddling. This is part of his routine. He moves the distance of half a thumbnail closer.

Then my stepmother is back, but my sister’s still behind the gate. Apparently, operation override needs work. I’m hungry and trying to keep my cool. This feels like a Denis Johnson story where people come and go like bad edits, but really it’s just nerves and history and alcohol.

We stand beside each other between the range and the sink, a few feet forward and to the right from where we first started. Over the bullnose of the marble counter she smooths the small square of typewritten directions, no bigger than my palm, runs the pad of her index finger over and over it as if printing through her fingertip, perhaps a way of starting again. The rhythm, the repetition soothing in and of itself. I put my arm around her and watch her go young, in, low.

“Fifty years,” she says, like a little girl.

Just beyond, my father exits the pool, rising till his feet are level with her throat, “and he doesn’t trust me,” she exhales, perfume all around.