THE ETERNAL PURSUIT OF THE UNATTAINABLE

Racheal Crowther On 4th March 2018, Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer & double agent for the British intelligence services, & his daughter Yulia Skripal were poisoned in Salisbury, England. Evidence confirmed that two Russian agents had travelled from Russia to execute the attack using a concentrated Novichok nerve agent, which was found in high levels on Sergei's front door. Sergei & Yulia were in critical condition & spent weeks in intensive care. Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey was also hospitalised as he was sent to investigate the home of Sergei following the attack. After 2 months in hospital Sergei & Yulia were discharged, as was Nick Bailey. Despite the attempt, there were no fatalities – until months later.

On 30th June 2018, Charlie Rowley & Dawn Sturgess were poisoned in Amesbury, which is situated eight miles from Salisbury. Both Charlie & Dawn were taken to hospital in critical condition. They exhibited distinct symptoms that raised concerns; subsequent testing confirmed that they too had been exposed to a Novichok nerve agent.

Charlie met Dawn in early 2018 when both were living in separate homeless hostels in Salisbury. Dawn was still living in Salisbury; Charlie had more recently moved to a flat in Amesbury where the Novichok contamination took place.¹

On 27th June 2018, Charlie had been rummaging through a charity shop bin in Salisbury. He said he had found a television there not long before, & the bin was known to have some valuable items in from time to time.

"On that day there was nothing that caught my eye other than this perfume. I picked it up, put it in my pocket & forgot about it for a little while. It stayed in my coat pocket."²

Days later, on 30th June 2018, Charlie gave Dawn the perfume bottle as a gift.

It was labelled Premier Jour by Nina Ricci.

Dawn gladly accepted the gift & said that she recognised the name.

Inside the battered Nina Ricci box was a bottle & a pump which were wrapped in plastic. As Charlie assembled the pump to the bottle, he accidentally released some of the *perfume* onto his hand. He immediately washed it off, noticing its oily texture & its lack of smell. Dawn went ahead & sprayed the *perfume* onto her wrists. Shortly after spraying the *perfume* Dawn became very unwell, began foaming at the mouth & shaking, before eventually becoming unconscious. She was hospitalised immediately. The next day, Charlie also fell ill, but his symptoms were much less severe than Dawn's. Whilst in hospital, Dawn's condition deteriorated rapidly & she tragically passed away on 8th July 2018.³

Dawn Sturgess was the only fatality during the Salisbury poisonings. It is understood that the Russian agents did not target Charlie Rowley or Dawn Sturgess: there was no intention for either to be poisoned. This was a fatal accident, due to a haphazardly discarded perfume bottle containing a deadly chemical weapon. Picked out from a charity shop donation bin; believed to be something it was not. Gifted as something it was not.

I often think about this tragedy & the fact that the poisoned chalice in question was a perfume bottle. *Premier jour* is a French phrase which translates into English as 'first day.' This is horribly ironic, as it was this bottle which brought about Dawn Sturgess's last. When police found the perfume bottle in Charlie's flat, they investigated further, even speaking directly with Nina Ricci:

"We have spoken to Nina Ricci & undertaken further inquiries. Nina Ricci & our inquiries have confirmed that it is not a genuine Nina Ricci perfume bottle, box, or nozzle. It is in fact a counterfeit box, bottle & nozzle that have been especially adapted. I'd like to reassure anyone who has bought Nina Ricci per fume from a legitimate source that they should not be concerned. It is safe."







Screenshots taken from the BBC dramatization 'The Salisbury Poisonings' (Series 1, Episode 3) which aired on 14 June 2020. These images depict Dawn Sturgess accepting the perfume from Charlie Rowley; she sprays it onto her wrist, smells her wrist & says: "That's weird, it doesn't smell of anything."

The Salisbury poisonings hold a significant point of interest for me as the tragedy within them is poignantly illustrative of certain contemplations I'd been having surrounding social class & the psychology of perfume. Reflecting on the circumstances of Charlie Rowley & Dawn Sturgess, I can't help but acknowledge the relationship between their socioeconomic background & the symbolism of the perfume bottle.

Growing up I always deemed perfume as a luxury item. I remember my mum's only treat to herself was buying a bottle of perfume & she would make it last for years. It wasn't a particularly expensive perfume, but it was something which couldn't be replenished often. I wasn't allowed to spray it; I wasn't allowed to go anywhere near it. This amplified my perception of perfume being something "special" & to a point, inaccessible.

In the early 00s, as I was entering the thralls of puberty, I remember begging my mum to buy me a bottle of Glow by J Lo (a celebrity perfume by singer/actress Jennifer Lopez). I wouldn't say I was particularly interested in Jennifer Lopez at the time,

but I was interested in being like the other girls at school. I didn't want to stand out or to be shamed for not having what everyone else had. Every girl had a bottle (or at least lied about having a bottle) of *Glow*. I too would lie about having a bottle of *Glow*: instead, I had an inexpensive body spray from Asda. 13-year-old me was worlds away from J Lo's intentions for the scent: "I wanted Glow to be fresh & clean, but still sexy & sensual – something that feels like you just came out of the shower & are the sexiest person in the world."⁵



Glow was the best-selling celebrity fragrance of its time: it made \$300million in its first year in 2002. Glow paved the way for the saturated celebrity fragrance market which followed. Heiress by Paris Hilton, Heat by Beyonce, Fantasy by Britney Spears, Beyond by David Beckham, Legend by Muhammed Ali, Girlfriend by Justin Bieber, Fame by Lady Gaga, Controversial by Jade Goody, Success by Donald Trump (just to name a few).









grance in the 90s/00s, its trajectory has been on a steady decline, with significant drops in sales. The success of a perfume would be dependent on the success & longevity of the celebrity birthing it; for some, the ethanol preservation of their 15 minutes of fame wouldn't reach higher than the bottom shelf of a discount shop. Then again, even the most lucrative celebrities have seen their perfume sales drop in the current climate. I assume this is due to the rise of smartphone technologies & the integration of social media within our everyday. Unlimited access to celebrity dampens the allure of any former mystique or exclusivity. A falsified fragrance feels dated now. It is no longer intimate enough, especially when set against the digital platforms which have brought celebrities so much closer to their fans. THE ETERNAL PURSUIT OF

Despite the roaring success of the celebrity fra-

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Celebrities weren't the only ones to capitalise on the fragrance world. In 1999, luxury sports car manufacturer Ferrari released their first fragrance, *Ferrari Black*. In an interview, the chief executive of Ferrari stated that the perfume "inspires the same emotions as the car – speed, adrenaline pumping... I'm not selling cars, I'm selling a dream."6 This was targeted at an audience who couldn't afford to buy a luxury car, but still wanted an access point to something which would otherwise remain out of their reach. This is exactly what most perfumes set out to do: sell a dream, whilst providing holographic access to something unattainable. Due to the intangibility of scent & its ephemeral nature, advertising works twice as hard to evoke desire, fantasy, luxury, romance, promises of self-transformation, liberation & even transgression.7 The commerciality of perfume taps into the human longing for something beyond the ordinary, beyond the 'everyday,' intricately weaving psychological triggers, captivating imagery & sensory allure to manipulate desire & to play on our innate insecurities.

In 1996, the avant-garde luxury fashion house Viktor&Rolf released a fictional fragrance called *Le Parfum*. *Le Parfum* received the same treatment as any other fully realised perfume. The emphasis was placed on the packaging, branding & advertising campaign, though inside the intentionally sealed bottle was an odourless perfume.



"... the scent has an intoxicating effect. Anticipated by its advertisement, [it can] only be imagined: sealed by a wax cap, the flask cannot be opened. The perfume can neither evaporate nor give off its scent & will forever be the potential of pure promise."

- Viktor&Rolf

Through the deliberate absence of actual scent, *Le Parfum* symbolized a conceptual exploration of the divergence between traditional olfactory expectations & the realm of visual & semiotic representation within perfume advertising. This mirrors the

dominant trends in marketing where the sensory & emotional aspects of a product frequently outweigh its utilitarian characteristics.

TESTER

At the age of 15, I had convinced myself that to own a perfume was to be an adult, to be a woman. I was also living alone at the time, so it felt somewhat urgent that I be taken seriously. It was one of those neurotic coming-of-age afflictions I would often feel. I still had no means to buy perfume, so I found alternative ways to enter the world of luxury fragrance. I had an impressive collection of half-empty shoplifted tester bottles, alongside various counterfeit perfumes from illegitimate shops. I have sensitive skin & found that the counterfeit perfumes would irritate it, so these remained unused, but still on display like little trophies as the packaging was identical to its luxury counterpart. I was a real woman now.

COUNTERFEIT STREET

The counterfeit goods market is thought to be worth £8.6 billion in the UK & half of that is said to be linked to a short stretch of shuttered shops on Bury New Road in Cheetham Hill, Manchester, I grew up in Manchester & knew the area very well. It was always known as Counterfeit Street. Over the past decade it gained significant notoriety, with customers travelling far & wide to visit. The juxtaposition of Counterfeit Street being located directly opposite Strangeways Prison was indeed a somewhat ironic situation: the illegitimate shops very much hiding in plain sight. I had been to Counterfeit Street many times over the years. I wasn't a stranger to the trade; I'd bought replica handbags before. It's worth mentioning it is far from a luxury shopping experience. You walk down the street, you notice the lookouts: if they suspect that you are a customer, they will usher you to crawl under a shutter whilst telling you "It's just like Selfridges inside." When inside, the shutter closes behind you & you find yourself in a windowless, claustrophobic room filled with a heady stench of plastic, enveloped by piles & piles of boxes containing replica goods. Now, to

give credit where it's due, some of the replicas are so similar to the real I struggled to tell them apart. These would be described as "super clones," usually made (without permission) in the same factory as the original product using scraps & leftover material. Super clones aren't cheap either: £120+ for a jacket, £80+ for a bag. There are of course, cheaper alternatives available, at the cost of cheaper materials & misspelt branding. A super clone was as close to the real as you could get. It always struck me that there was still a hierarchy of cost, determining access, even in the world of counterfeits. There was undoubtedly something unsettling about being locked in a room under unforgiving strip lights amongst piles & piles of counterfeit goods spilling out of rat-chewed cardboard boxes. The allure of the label certainly lost its je ne sais quoi in the void of visual merchandising & care. It was a no-frills transaction. No return, no refunds. It allowed myself and many others to cosplay something which was otherwise unattainable.

Counterfeit Street had become renowned, operating not only on Bury New Road but also selling to the rest of the country through channels such

as WhatsApp, Signal & other encrypted messaging apps. TikTok pages promoting new stock would cyclically be removed for breaching community guidelines, but always find ways to return, like perennial weeds. The demand was high & showed no signs of slowing down. Until November 2022, when Greater Manchester Police implemented *Operation Vulcan*. This would be a multi-agency attack on *Counterfeit Street*.

"Operation Vulcan is following the Government strategy of clear, hold, build – through which officers are methodically clearing the area of criminal activity, the next phase is to hold it so other criminal gangs cannot get a foot-hold & ultimately building it into a prosperous area once more where people are proud to live & work."



07.09.2023 Interjection-009-09 Racheal Crowther.pdf Monteg Press Violent police raids became an everyday occurrence on Bury New Road. From November 2022 to May 2023 the police shut down an estimated 100 illegitimate shops & made 142 arrests. Operation Vulcan worked alongside immigration, the border force, the fire service, trading standards as well as Manchester City Councils, who worked with the landlords to issue prohibition notices to stop the premises reopening.11



https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greatermanchester-news/counterfeit-street-deserted-saturday-shutters-26159063

During one of Operation Vulcan's raids, police seized 400 counterfeit perfume bottles.

"Despite looking identical to the real thing, laboratory tests of samples previously seized have shown the perfume to contain poisonous chemicals including cyanide & human urine."12

This scenario draws parallels to the counterfeit perfume used in the Salisbury poisonings.

Despite its outward resemblance to a legitimate item, it harboured a sinister reality beneath the surface.

INHERITANCE POWDERS

The associative relationship between perfume & poison is nothing new.

In 17th century France, under the rule of King Louis XIV, a series of scandalous events known as the Affair of the Poisons (also known as Affaire des Poisons) took place. It involved a network of individuals, mostly within the Parisian elite, engaging in various criminal activities, including murder, witchcraft & poisoning. It was centred around the activities of a woman named Catherine Monvoisin, also known

as "La Voisin," who operated as a fortune teller & purveyor of occult services. She provided poisons, love potions & conducted black magic rituals for her clients, many of whom were from the aristocracy & sought her services for personal gain, revenge, or other nefarious purposes. Prominent figures, including nobles & even the King's mistress, were accused of using "inheritance powders" (poisons) to eliminate rivals in order to secure power & wealth. The poisons in question were often disguised in food, drinks, cosmetics & perfumes.¹³

Operating at a similar time in Italy was a woman called Giulia Tofana, an infamous poisoner who sold a concoction called *Aqua Tofana*. The poison was made & dispensed by a group of 'wise women' to an almost exclusively female clientele; the poison was used to murder cruel & unwanted husbands to achieve freedom & financial gain. It is said to have killed around 600 people, most of whom were men. It was bottled in glass vials, sold & disguised as "Manna di San Nicola" ("Manna of St. Nicholas") – a healing oil collected from where it was said to drip from the bones of St Nicholas.

Agua Tofana was described as clear & tasteless, suggesting that a key part of the manufacturing process was masking the characteristic metallic taste of arsenic.14 The first small dosage would produce cold-like symptoms. The victim would become very ill by the third dose: symptoms included vomiting, dehydration, diarrhoea & a burning sensation in the digestive system. The fourth dose would eventually kill the victim. The poison's slow-acting nature & untraceable symptoms made it a favoured method for those seeking to eliminate someone without arousing suspicion. The fame of Aqua Tofana eventually caught up with Giulia Tofana who was arrested in 1659. She & her daughter were put to trial & executed for their involvement in producing & distributing the poison.15

I was particularly struck by *Aqua Tofana* being disguised & sold as healing oil from the body of St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas was well known for his generosity & compassion towards the less fortunate, particularly children. His feast day, December 6th, became a day of gift-giving in many European countries. The transformation of St. Nicholas into Santa Claus as we know him today has been

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influenced by various cultural & folkloric elements. In the United States, Dutch settlers brought the tradition of "Sinterklaas", their version of St. Nicholas, to New Amsterdam (now New York) in the 17th century. The name "Sinterklaas" gradually evolved into "Santa Claus."

The commercialized iteration of Santa Claus we see today has become a conduit for economic interest. Imbued in conspicuous consumption, the image of Santa has been harnessed as a marketing tool designed to stimulate consumer spending & deftly capitalise on the tradition of gift-giving.

There has always been an intrinsic link between gift-giving & perfume.

Last Christmas alone, The Perfume Shop sold 1.8 million bottles between 28th November - 24th December 2022.16 One of its bestsellers being Poison by Dior.

POISON IS MY POTION



In 1985, luxury fashion house Dior released *Poison*.

Why would anyone name a perfume Poison? Maybe in hopes that a perverse name would be noticed and prove intriguing, as it had for such scents as Opium and Obsession.

"If someone says to you, 'Would you like to smell poison?' You're interested because everyone wants to know what poison smells like."

- William Slater, Senior Vice President of Christian Dior US (1986).17

Poison is shaped like an apple, blood red in colour. It is reminiscent of the poisoned apple in Snow White, but namely the forbidden fruit in the biblical story Adam & Eve. The forbidden fruit in Adam & Eve symbolizes disobedience, a pursuit of knowledge, a desire for a glimpse into a realm beyond their immediate experience. It is the concept of original sin. Similarly, the Dior Poison bottle becomes a symbol of temptation, coaxed with the allure of something beyond the ordinary, synonymous with danger.

In 1998, following the success of *Poison*, Dior released *Hypnotic Poison*. This time the perfumer wanted you to know what poison smelt like. The inclusion of bitter almond notes in its scent was far from coincidental: it was a homage to the famous scent of cyanide.¹⁸

The irony of the creators of *Hypnotic Poison* going to great lengths to evoke a sense of danger by emulating the smell of cyanide, yet their perfume remaining completely harmless, contrasted with the counterfeit perfumes whose creators tried desperately to mimic their luxury counterparts whilst concealing traces of actual cyanide & other toxic, harmful chemicals. Both efforts are rooted in deception.



Baudrillard in his essay Seduction speaks of the myth that "according to the ancients, the panther is the only animal to emit a fragrant odour, which it uses to capture its victims. The panther has only to hide & its victims are bewitched by its scent – an invisible trap in which they come to be caught." 19

Dawn Sturgess, after receiving the gift of *Premier Jour*, noted that it didn't smell of anything; the name and image alone was enough for her to accept it & to continually spray it, unknowing that it would kill her. A renowned brand, elegant packaging, adorning a

French name, it projected an image of sophistication, travel & luxury. By accepting it, Dawn might have felt she was embracing a piece of a world she wouldn't usually have access to, even if the actual content was devoid of the promised aroma.

Both counterfeit & legitimate perfume industries capitalise on the human desire for status, luxury & social elevation. Whether it's down to economic constraints, a desire to project an image of wealth & success, peer pressure or the hypnotic allure of media-driven fantasies, the likes of *Counterfeit Street* thrived on the interplay between illusion and reality. Inside its warehouses of simulated luxury, were shortcuts to a semblance of prestige.

In our modern world, exhausted modes of deception used within commercialised desire & advertising create a desensitisation & degradation of our capacity for libidinal phenomena through the continually delayed promise of satisfaction & internalised impetus to produce & consume. The only lifeline being the eternal pursuit of the unattainable – an invisible trap in which we come to be caught.

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