



GAIN

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I was just thrifting online and all of a sudden I could *smell* The Garment District in Kendall Square, Cambridge, on a very cold day in February.

The smell of used clothes in winter—which is somehow *also* the smell of dead energy waiting to be reanimated. Stale sweat, I guess, and the chemicals in soap, deodorant and perfume, mixed with various kinds of mold and decay—plus years.

This was the smell of liberty when I was fourteen.

During the pandemic I had a man who was very well-groomed. In fact I had never been with someone so punctiliously clean. He was covered in tattoos and his hair was as curly as a poodle's, but he knew things about cleaning products and also about the care of his own body that put me to shame.

He was devoted to GAIN, a particular brand of laundry detergent. He had a friend who has since died with whom he would sometimes clean Airbnbs. The friend had exquisite taste and was a good gardener and knew all the gossip in the town.

It was OCD the two of them had in common, and also drugs, and I realized slowly and with a sense of awe and tenderness that the OCD and the drugs were indivisible from one another and that both needs—for drugs and for cleanliness—had somehow entered these men through their mothers, or afflicted these men as a consequence of their mothers.

I can't remember what my pandemic boyfriend smelled like. He never stank and was proud of this fact. It's true that men often smell bad: if they eat a sandwich you can smell it in their ass or their nutsack almost immediately. Some men always smell like rotting meat.

I had a friend in sixth grade who always smelled of urine. She knew it because we told her and she bathed every day and always wore clean clothes but there it was. She had a piss smell and I don't know why.

Probably an Ayurvedic specialist or acupuncturist could easily get to the bottom of this; probably all knowledge systems are congealing into a kind of





malleable putty from which the new world will have to be fashioned.

Men will say, I could smell you all over me, I could smell you all day. This is something men say when they love you, or are in the phase of knowing that they're into you.

I used to rub black pepper oil on my belly when I was PMSing: it evaporated quickly but it made me feel I had the power to lift myself out of myself; to transcend the hells and humiliations of my body.





My mother and grandmother both wore Givenchy L'Interdit, a scent that was created for Audrey Hepburn and forbidden to be sold, thus the name. It was recently re-introduced to the market, but the perfume they are selling as L'Interdit smells nothing like my mother and grandmother. I tested it in a Duty Free in Graz, Austria a few weeks ago and was hit with a kind of peachy exudation of polyester velour, like Paris Hilton's pink tracksuit updated for a zoomer transfixed by the permanent nineties, in no way evoking my mother or grandmother, or the kind of woman both aspired to be, and were.

The man I love is grinding his right fist into his calf beside me right now. He is naked and covered in a lotion made of unrefined shea butter and peppermint. It's a lot of peppermint in this lotion. It makes him smell like an Andes mint.

When my grandmother died I filled a suitcase with her clothes so that I could unzip it sometimes and smell her. She had a beautiful smell, even when she wasn't wearing L'Interdit. She wore Oil of Olay lotion and she smoked Carlton Menthols, like my mother, and she had a power over men and over me that

just took your breath away and made you want to serve her, not because she *looked* beautiful exactly, but because she exuded beauty, and by beauty I mean a sense of something something magical, the kind of thing people survive horrors hoping one day to feel again, even for only a moment.

