The Perfumer

By Chara M Odhner
10:23 AM
HELEN ARRIVES AT MR. ENOUSH PEARL’S PERFUMERIA IN THE JEWISH QUARTER.

SHE EXAMINES THE BOTTLES IN THE WINDOW BEFORE VENTURING INSIDE. MR. PEARL IS WELL KNOWN FOR HIS SCENTS. HIS SCENTS ARE ONLY SOLD HERE, ONLY SOLD BY MR. PEARL HIMSELF. AND THEY ARE UNPARALLELED, UNIQUE, AND UNFORGETTABLE ....
ORDINARY PERFUMERS ARE SIMPLY artistic CHEMISTS, COMBINING ELEMENTS CREATIVELY TO PRODUCE SPECIFIC PLEASING ODORS.

MR. PEARL IS NO ORDINARY PERFUMER.
MR. PEARL BOTTLES ESSENCE.
THE HUMAN CONDITION DICTATES THE NECESSITY OF THE SEARCH FOR THE ESSENTIAL.

PHILOSOPHERS TRY TO UNDERSTAND ESSENCE THROUGH CONTEMPLATION ...
... SCIENTISTS USE EXPERIMENTATION ...
... ARTISTS ATTEMPT TO CREATE IT FROM RAW IMAGINATION ...
... LOVERS FIND ESSENCE IN COMPANIONSHIP ...
... AND MEANWHILE, UNKNOWN TO THE WORLD AT LARGE, MR. ENOSH PEARL HAS CAPTURED PURE ESSENCE IN LIQUID FORM AND HE SELLS IT IN HIS SHOP IN THE JEWISH QUARTER.
MR PEARL HAS BEEN BOTTLING ESSENCE FOR DECADES.

HE HAS NO ASSISTANT.

HE SELLS EVERY BOTTLE OF SCENT HIMSELF, FOR THE PROCESS, "DIAGNOSIS," IS NO SIMPLE MATTER. NO ONE WANTS TO END UP WITH AN ESSENCE THAT IS NOT THEIR OWN.
WHEN HELEN INQUIRES ABOUT A SCENT, MR. PEARL PRESENTS HER WITH SEVEN BOTTLES.
Uncorking a slender bottle, Mr Pearl waves the fragrance beneath Helen's chin. She breathes in deeply, slowly, satisfied; tears spill down her cheeks.

She wags her head back and forth.

No.
Helen grips the counter edge when the fragrance touches her nostrils. Her chest puffs up and she holds her head a bit higher.

She fills her lungs and, taking a step backwards, says plainly, “Not quite.”
The scent of reason reminds Helen of something distant but familiar. The fragrance is subtle, with undertones of old books and jasmine.

“This one is too clear.”
TO HER DISMAY, JOY LEAVES HELEN FEELING EMPTY.

LIKE A ZEPHYR THE SCENT PASSES HER BY NOT UNPLEASANTLY, BUT OFFERS NOT ENOUGH CONSOLATION IN THE AFTERMATH.
When Mr Pearl offers a squat little bottle with a long neck filled with a grey tinted fluid, Helen doesn’t smell anything. She looks up at Mr Pearl confusedly, takes another deep breath. Still nothing.

Mr Pearl, re-corking the bottle, says, “Not as uncommon as you may think, actually.”
Humor strikes Helen sharply. It knocks her flat; she lands on her firm, cushioned behind. She giggles when she lands, uninjured, imagining that the fall was of her own doing. Mr Pearl shuffles quickly around the counter to offer her a hand up. "Perhaps not."
WHEN COMPASSION TOUCHES HELEN SHE FEELS WARMTH SPREAD OUTWARD.

SHE BRIEFLY VISITS THE SOULS OF EACH OF HER LOVED ONES, THEN AFTER LONG MOMENTS WITH CLOSED EYES, SHE PASSES THE BOTTLE BACK TO MR. PEARL.
10:54 AM
HELEN LEAVES MR. ENOSH PEARL’S PERFUMERIA IN THE JEWISH QUARTER, ONE SMALL BOTTLE OF COMPASSION IN HAND.

10:55 AM
MR. PEARL TURNS HIS ATTENTION BACK TO PERFUMING.
Some of Mr. Pearl’s loyal customers wonder why he is not more well-known, more successful. Customers rarely depart empty-handed, for who doesn’t desire a bottle of their own essence?

Or, they wonder, is it a flaw in advertising?

Mr. Pearl’s brewing methods are unique and genuine. He has never mislabeled, underbrewed, or fallen flat.

Perhaps, some speculate, he is more successful than he seems, and his modest situation is simply preference.
Some essences come to Mr Pearl quite easily—beauty, his first scent, took only a few weeks to complete, start to finish.

Others take longer.

The essence Mr Pearl is currently chasing has already usurped three-and-a-half years.

It was nearly ten years ago that he first encountered the idea, but the concept was too elusive then.
SO INSTEAD HE BOTTLED JEST AND CHASTITY.
THEN IT TOOK HIM SEVERAL YEARS TO CHASE DOWN CLARITY ...
... but the chase also led to ...

... gravity ...

... tenacity ...

... and cunning.
IT WAS CUNNING THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING.

CUNNING HAS UNDERTONES OF EARTHINESS, THE SCENT IS MUSTIER THAN ANY OTHER MR. PEARL HAS BOTTLED. THE PERFECTLY TRANSLUCENT LIQUID HAS NOT EVEN A GLIMMER OF COLOR.
It was just after the completion of cunning, while Mr Pearl was in London, that the idea occurred to him to categorize and condense his creations.

Expansion, experimentation, elaboration, clarification had absorbed him since the inception of his bottling days. But he was aging, and the training of an apprentice would require not only instruction in methodology and process, but schooling in diagnosis. And that, Mr Pearl thought, could be made easier first by categorization and second by condensation.
SO MR PEARL TOOK A YEAR TO CATEGORIZE, TO DESCRIBE, LABEL, AND ORGANIZE HIS BOTTLES.
His newest project is condensation item number one: *adolescence*.

A decade ago, without hesitation, he would have created a dozen or so scents for each veiled quality of adolescence—resilience, creativity, audacity, connection, persistence, moratorium, indefatigability. But instead Mr Pearl has undertaken the creation of one encompassing scent.

Less work, in theory. And besides, adolescence is self-descriptive; any idiot assistant can sell adolescence to a teenager.
Mr. Pearl continues his work on adolescence throughout the summer.

The shop is uncomfortably warm, but Mr. Pearl acknowledges it only by rolling up his shirtsleeves.
But Mr Pearl, who has tirelessly diagnosed customers and carefully selected scents for them for decades has recently grown impatient.

Instead of the customary seven choices, Mr Pearl begins offering only six, then five, and in late August, when the heat is most oppressive and the glass bottles slightly warm to the touch, Mr Pearl begins providing only three choices to anyone who comes to his shop.
"Less customers, less interruptions," he argues to himself.

Naturally, this means his diagnoses begin to err. Customers begin leaving unsatisfied.

"Less customers, less interruptions," he argues to himself.

Despite his long hours of toil and concentration, Mr. Pearl's project is not going well. He combines the essences of creativity, persistence, and moratorium with just a splash of audacity, but the perfume is too straightforward, and lacks the undertones of the age.

He adds resilience and increases the amount of audacity, but the result is too harsh without enough give. He tries combination after combination, but each combination lacks something.
2 MONTHS LATER
HELEN RETURNS TO MR. PEARL’S PERFUMERIA FOR A REFILL OF COMPASSION

HELEN NOTICES THAT THE BOTTLES IN THE WINDOW DISPLAY ARE DUSTY.

MR PEARL GLANCES UP WHEN SHE ENTERS, NODS, AND RETURNS TO HIS CALCULATIONS.
Mr Pearl, I don’t expect you have any scents appropriate for a thirteen-year-old girl? I would like to find one for my daughter.

I am afraid not, Ma’am.

None at all? I have been considering, if you have a scent called companionship, or perhaps belonging ... I believe a scent with one of those names may be just right for her.
MR. PEARL LOOKS UP, AND ACTUALLY SEES HELEN FOR THE FIRST TIME TODAY.
BELONGING?
I DON'T HAVE A SCENT CALLED BELONGING.
MR PEARL STANDS UP, AND DISAPPEARS INTO THE BACK OF THE SHOP — HIS LABORATORY.
As she waits for Mr. Pearl to return, Helen examines the bottles behind the counter.

She notices how they are carefully grouped in kind, mercy and comfort together, strength near diligence, patience and acceptance on the same shelf.
After calling but receiving no response, Helen ventures behind the counter and past the curtain into the laboratory.

Madam, I think we have it!

Here, come here.

Allow me to show you.

Come here.
HELEN SILENTLY MOVES TO SIT ON A STOOL BESIDE MR. PEARL.

YES, YES. HERE. SMELL.

MR. PEARL WAVES THE SMALLER BOTTLE BENEATH HELEN'S NOSE.

THE SCENT ENCOMPASSES HER.
AH, HA!
YOU SEE?
WE HAVE DONE IT, YES WE HAVE.
BUT HERE ...
THIS IS THE REAL MASTERPIECE.

SMELLING THE PERFECTLY CLEAR, SHINING LIQUID FILLS HELEN WITH THE DESIRE TO TAKE A TRIP, OR HAVE AN ADVENTURE, OR MEET SOMEONE NEW.

THE SCENT IS UNFAMILIAR TO HER, BUT SHE FEELS FLEETING INSPIRATION ...

AND SIMULTANEOUSLY, HELEN FEELS COMPLETELY DEVOID OF FEAR.
BUT MOMENTS LATER ...  
inexpressible sadness  

SHE HOLDS BACK THE TEARS ... BUT BARELY.
AND THEN A THIRD LAYER OF THE SCENT ARRIVES ...

HELEN TRIES TO DESCRIBE IT TO HERSELF, BUT WORDS FAIL.

longing
desire
transformation
WHAT WAS THAT?
That, madam, is the culmination.

It is condensation project number one.

It is the combination of seven scents.

It is a scent specifically designed for a certain age, a certain stage of growth.

It is, my dear, designed for youth, masterfully concocted for the adolescent state.

This perfume, I believe, is a scent for puberty.
This perfume, I believe, is Change.