

KERRY LANGAN

ETERNAL YOUTH

They say that of all the senses, smell is the one that can trigger memories of the past most easily. I believe it. When I was twenty, I was a perfume girl at Sheffield's, one of the nicest department stores in Toronto. Scents of all kind were a big part of my life then. Every week, I sprayed some new fragrance on the customers. Honey had the standard golden color of most perfumes, but it came in a little glass jar shaped like a bumble bee; you opened the lid by unscrewing the bee's wings. As clever as that was, the perfume itself smelled a little too much like bug repellent for my taste. Sunlight was a big seller. It was a topaz-colored fluid, a browner gold than usual, and it had a sprite, open-air scent. I was supposed to say, "Would you like a ray of sunlight?" and then wave the bottle in a circle before squirting a customer. I only did that when a supervisor was walking by; I didn't want the customers to think I was nuts. My favorite perfume of all was Rain Forest, a deep emerald elixir that came in a concave-shaped bottle painted with little gold vines everywhere and a beautiful long-beaked bird with fuschia and yellow feathers. It smelled like overgrown grass in August after a strong rain.

Not every one wanted to be sprayed with perfume. Women looked past me, avoided my gaze, suddenly becoming engrossed with the floor pattern or reaching into their purses to locate their car keys. I would call out to them, "Would you like to try. . ." but they'd say "No thank you," so abruptly that I'd stop talking mid-sentence. That kind of rejection can get to you after a while, so I learned not to hound the women who quickened their pace when they saw me. Other women stopped, eager to see what I was selling, and I sprayed their wrists, telling them to wave their arms a bit so the alcohol evaporated before they sniffed. Otherwise, the scent was too potent. For every ten bottles I sold, I got a teeny, tiny sample bottle. I would have preferred a commission, I only made minimum wage, but it didn't work that way at Sheffield's. As it was, I was always worried that if I didn't sell enough perfume, I'd be out of a

job.

Nancy, my friend who sold Coach purses, always came to see me before she left at six o'clock. She usually had a date and, like everybody else who worked at the store, couldn't afford to buy the things we sold. I looked around to make sure no one was watching and then sprayed her wrists and the back of her neck. In return, she would talk loudly about how wonderful the scent was, trying to drum up business for me. She wasn't the only one getting something for nothing. Every now and then, I snuck over to the Estee Lauder counter and Lucille, a woman who'd been at the store forever, gave me a mini make-over. We couldn't get away with that too often. There was always the risk of Billy Sheffield, the boss' son, lurking about. He cruised the store trying to look important, making sure everybody was doing their job. I could usually tell when he was around because he sucked on smelly eucalyptus cough drops all day.

One day I saw him leave early through the employee exit, so I walked fearlessly over to cosmetics. Before I asked Lucille if she could do my eyes with pearl-gray eye-shadow and black eye-liner, she raised her wrist and said, "Smell."

The jasminey scent with the spicy, clove undertone filled my nose up to my brain. I recognized it, but didn't know why. It wasn't a perfume that I promoted. Without warning, a picture formed in my mind and I got that spooky *deja vu* feeling. A corner of my brain started to reel and it was like I was watching a miniature movie. I remembered myself in a bedroom standing next to a bed I was too short to see over. The bed had a white chenille spread and I was reaching up, rubbing my hand back and forth over the fleecy lines that felt as soft as talcum powder. There was a woman standing in front of an open closet, her back to me, the zipper on her dress waiting to be pulled up. Her brown hair stopped at the bottom of her neck and flipped up at the edges. I think it was night time, and the room was swimming with the fresh scent of perfume, of this same scent on Lucille's wrist. I assumed that the woman at the closet was my mother, but, in my mind, I only saw her from the back.

"What is it?" I almost demanded of Lucille.

"Shangri La. Nice, huh?" Truth to tell, Lucille was wearing too much of it, but it was a nice scent. Not as obvious as most of the fragrances we sold; lighter, more secretive.

"Where did you get it?"