

Jen the First

by Benjamin Matvey

Suddenly, there is a scent in my nose that makes everything around me irrelevant: the perfume of the first girl who was ever foolish enough to have sex with me. I had been fingering through the latest contribution of Desmond Morris an instant ago, but now I am assaulted with wafts of that far too sweet, girlish, nonsensical scent; like a mixture of lavender, cinnamon, and citronella. I shove the book back into the shelf and spin around, startling an old man in a tweed hat behind me, but I do not see the culprit. She must have just walked by, distributed her scent and moved along.

My eyes dart to both sides and see too many women browsing, but none have the correct vector to have just passed me. But where would she go smelling like Jen the First? The romance section? The homeopathy section? The self-help section? Inexorable focus floods over me again and decides there is nothing more important in the History of Ever than finding that scent. But which way, left or right? Up the escalator or down the stairs? Through the coffee shop where the trail is sure to vanish, cloaked amid decaf eggnog lattes and mochaccinos? Or to another neighborhood of the store entirely, where they sell CDs and tote bags?

And who would choose to be such an anachronism, anyway!? Who would be so out of time and out of sense to seize a smell resting safely elsewhere in my head to where it could only bring befuddlement and tremendous temporal distress? And it has already happened: the smell infiltrates my nostrils, tunneling into my brain and bursting my long lost Jen-lobe, splattering previously forgotten sensations (and Jen-sations) over the restrained upholstery of my brain. And now it is as if I can smell a host of other smells unavailable to the shelf-dwellers and the Yuletide browsers: surprisingly vivid de-flowering smells. The smell of an aroused woman that at first struck me as unspeakable but now... it reminds

me of some of the few truly happy moments of my life. And, of course, following immediately on the tail of contentment, I remember regret. I so prefer it when the Lobe of General Sexual Experience explodes; with a broader canvas, it is harder to fish out a regret to fixate on—to fix.

I was a terrible lover back then. Not that I was expected to be a master, but it is discomfoting to think of how clueless I was. I was so excited to simply have SEX that any additional concerns with quality or care or duration were unfathomable. But now I can't stop myself from looking back and berating my younger self with “back seat” lovemaking like a backseat driver, always screaming “turn left.”

So I turn left and flare out my nostrils like a cowbell, a net to catch the Jen-smell. I pass a woman a few years younger than me in a short tartan skirt. She smells faintly of CK One. I pass a girl in gypsy dress who smells of nag champa, cranberries, and Ivory soap. I pass a co-ed with Cleopatra hair and a nose ring. She...she smells of vanilla body cream, but I press on, nonetheless. Five steps later, the terror that maybe I had gone the wrong way is nearly smothering, but still, I proceed deeper into the store, into the biography section.

The trail has gone thin; I smell only dust and paper and binding glue. My heart and my lungs flop like pancakes as I exhale in despair. I chose the wrong direction. I simply can't tolerate this world with so many turns and no road signs. I sit down on a step ladder to gather my mind. Must remember the details, must be sure I do the right thing next time around.

And this is sickest thing about me; I've never truly rid myself of the belief that I will have the opportunity to go back and correct my mistakes, *all* of my mistakes, regardless of how hard I might try to re-train and re-condition myself to its impossibility. But, on the other hand, I wonder how anyone can go on if life really is *live*, with no re-takes and no eight second delay. How can anyone just accept that the mistakes we make stay there, mocking us until we die, possibly of some very large mistake in our future?

The smell has forced me to sort through my irrepressible expectation that this life is only a dry run. I think I can blame this quirk on my mother, as that seems to be tradition in this country. It has to do with the God that she gave me.

Nominally my family was Catholic, but I think my parents opted for that only after my grandmother made it clear it would kill her if her grandchildren were brought up as Godless as Sputnik. So I think they simply chose the religion they “knew,” but my mother, in particular, couldn't rectify all the mysticism and incense and intermittent stigmata and novenas with the idea of an infinite, benign and omniscient creator.

She explained to me at an early age that the conventional representations of God and Heaven were just kitsch so that our primitive minds could begin to comprehend what lay beyond. She knew she needed to do this, not just for her own conscience, but because she knew the cartoon representations of Heaven were never going to meet my standards for eternal reward. Standing on clouds, playing harps, looking the same except for gigantic pigeon wings, seemed more like a punishment than a gift and certainly torture if it extended to infinity. If Heaven, the lynchpin of the whole damned moral system, was to be a true reward it simply had to be something so unique, so satisfying, so perfect that we would be foolish little pigeons, indeed, not to seek it.

But Mom stayed mum on what Heaven was like, preferring to pretend that she knew but wouldn't tell me, but all the while teasing me with this thought: “Do you think you can imagine what Heaven is like? He can do *anything*, remember?” So I was left with this mother of all puzzlers, bigger by far than what my Christmas presents would be: What was in store for me at the end of it all? What afterworld would be so fantastic to justify a life of dreary righteousness?

First, as I progressed through the lower grades, I imagined Heaven must be where God made you a peer. Omnipotent, omniscient, very tall, etc. His equal and confidant. That would be fun, wouldn't it? But this idea always kept falling apart.

Why would God make me and everyone else omnipotent? Wouldn't that threaten his power base? Wasn't it a little sick that my Heaven required me to be a deity? And what could a human mind do with omnipotence, anyway? After making an entire galaxy out of Ovaltine and dental floss half the population would be fresh out of ideas.

I used to imagine the tale of a newly-minted god, given omnipotence after death, standing a thousand times as large as the entire known universe, looking around him with inebriating awe. But after exhausting a billion years of thought in an instant, which he could then erase, and re-create, and re-do backwards with talking ponies playing parts of all the main characters, he finally becomes so detached, so bored and frustrated he destroys himself (poof!). Omnipotence always ended in suicide when I thought about it too much (which was always) and perhaps that was where God went, that night He slipped out and never came back. Or was that Dad? And if so does that mean it was God who kept stealing Mom's scotch?

Regardless, I needed my question answered. So I developed an unsophisticated idea: a heaven worth its salt had to be a place where you (as an individual created by God) name your own unique prize. Whatever you want. No hassle for the deity.

It was so simple, so sensible. When we die God would give us what we wanted, He wouldn't decide for us what Heaven should be. Free will was humanity's special characteristic and He wouldn't abandon it when handing out our gifts. But if this was true, I needed to be prepared. I needed to know at the drop of a hat what I would wish for, just in case I was struck by a stray bullet or incinerated in a 4th of July hamburger catastrophe (I was equally worried about both back then).

From that moment on, my neurosis with past offenses, imperfections and asymmetries became an obsession. Instead of letting go of painful moments I had to pick through them, study them, to find the moment I could have made the other choice. I scrutinized every detail of every mistake so I would not be caught

asking for cookies or a nice car at the pearly gates. I wanted to fix everything, live my life over substituting every wrong choice with the perfect one, every uncomfortable pause replaced with a brilliant quip, every crush I was aware of too late with a torrid affair, and every stalled checkout lane I chose with the fastest one. And my God, my sensible God, would have to let me if He really loved me as much as all those dour catholic school teachers promised me He did.

And even after I eased into godlessness and I could declare to the altar and to the moon that I was only an agnostic because I couldn't disprove his existence, this hope remained inextinguishable; A tool I could not abandon on the off chance, in some way, I might be right one day.

But just as I think this a shadow of the scent returns. I leap to my feet in front of a biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson, snorting the air ever more ferociously for Jen's perfume. A blonde streaks by, crossing the shelves only an aisle away. I just catch a glimpse of her backpack, it has a peace symbol, a marijuana leaf, and three of those dancing Grateful Dead bears sewn into the fabric. Jen the First had those bears ironed into her jeans, plastered to her bedroom wall, and stuck to the bumper of her shiny, young Volkswagen. I try to remind myself I am not actually chasing Jen, but the all-consuming specter of future regrets propels me forward, after that girl.

And maybe that was Jen? Perhaps Jens, like leprechauns, do not age? Perhaps when I catch her she will turn around in unblemished Jen-ness, still 16 years old. Just like the first time I saw her: in a close fitting long-sleeved tie-dye, with wooden beads around her neck and incongruous olive drab military pants held up with a braided leather belt. Her hair was always long and a perfectly straight strawberry-blonde and her lips glistened from peach-flavored gloss.

I had no pre-conceptions of what a "deadhead" was then. I knew nothing of their legendarily poor hygiene, their razor-aversion, and their myth that hair was "self-washing" if you let it go long enough. To me "deadheads" meant rich girls with perfumed

blouses, manicured hair, skin as clear as a lake, and legs shaven and toned from running track.

The first time I saw her I gave up, she was out of my awkward and brooding league. Her always slightly tanned skin seemed to vibrate with sex, and sex was that maddening goal that only seemed more unattainable when this glistening creature walked into my friend's living room looking for the "guy who sells mushrooms." And though that wasn't me or my friend who I was sitting with watching re-runs of *Battle of the Planets* (in willful defiance of the age-categorization), she stayed and talked with us, with *me*, smoking cigarettes and giggling, telling stories of road trips and dead shows and parties where she drank too much and about this girl in her class who actually got to fuck a Grateful Dead roadie. To which I said "I'm *sure* he was. You know, I'm one of the Dead's roadies?"

My joke was meant to be dismissive, but the soon-to be Jen the First, maneuvered her eyes directly on to mine. I fumbled a breath. It was a look I had never before received; it was focused right on me with an animal intensity that reduced me to a meat dish or a play thing. I stifled the exhilaration bubbling up from my belly and tried to retain some cool. My disinterest had to be what drew her and I was not about to modify any approach that worked. As I dismissed her further, I mumbled under my breath and worried if it was even possible to proceed without ruining this astonishing possibility.

And I see her now! The girl with the backpack. Her back is still to me, but only a few feet away in the poetry section fiddling with an anthology of the beats. As I inch closer, I have to remind myself this isn't her, this is not only *not* Jen the First, but it probably isn't even the girl who brought that scent into this book store and initiated this most recent frenzy. It couldn't be, it's too unlikely, I had turned the wrong way, it was all in error...

But now I am in the aura of her body and I can smell it, hints of that conjuring fragrance. I step closer; it is unquestionably Jen's perfume, the lavender, the cinnamon, the bug candle. As I edge forward I see that the girl's hair is perfect and straight, her small

body looks as skinny as a 16 year old, and like Jen, she comes up only slightly above my collar bones. My hand presses itself ever so slightly onto her shoulder strap. My heart jumps as she turns her head around, casting more of that addictive smell outwards.

The girl I am looking at has a pretty, angular face; her forehead is furrowed with concern and her face in a hesitant smirk.

“Can I help you?” She asks, small-ly.

I muster a sincere head shake and apologize to this possible Jen who is sadly not Jen the First. “Very sorry. Thought you were someone else.” I say and she turns her head back to the books she was looking at. But in that following instant, while it is still acceptable for me to be close enough to her to suck in that smell, I bask in the vividness of the memories it gives me.

It brings back the illicit romps in Jen the First's mother's room under the blue light of an unwatched TV screen. The shaking fingers, feasting on the strange contours of a smooth and strong body, and kissing her with every muscle in my neck. And that smell, that immature and ecstatic smell, has made this image clear and crisp, in full-digitized color and I think of each stroke, of each peck and nibble and lick. I am with mad Jen the First again in a frenzy, as if we only had seconds left before our youth ran out. She pins my head to the pillow and opens her eyes wide as if to let her mania seep out and drip into my eyes. And I swear from a shivering in my back a few drops do. But before I can drift off, back into the stacks, into an uninterrupted moment of heat and skin and unbounded excitement, I have to intrude on the memory and glare at myself from a few meters distance and think about how differently I will do it next time.

