

PHANTASMIC PERFUME

香鬼

The narrative thread spun here by professional perfumer and author Ku Nai-Fang, beguilingly seasoned with the vagaries and aromas of life, turns funk into fragrance and does wonders with rubbish. The gems in this story, capped and sealed, effervesce with the true essence of self.

Up-and-coming perfumer Peipei transforms a rental flat in Taipei into a home-cum-perfumery studio. Her only companion, An, an orangutan who had broken out of an experimental laboratory, is blessed with an uncanny knack for fragrance aesthetics and creating alluringly unique olfactory configurations. An's deceptively capricious blends always seem to end in something surprisingly wonderful. But this mutually advantageous relationship is not immune to conflict and, one day, Peipei is the catalyst that ends An's life.

An's loss traps Peipei in a circle of anguish and memories of their time together. But it is when their fragrance wins a long-coveted major award and she is unable to recreate the formula on her own that she finally realizes she must blaze her own trail forward. She restarts her life and studio in a new location where she meets a man who, like An, had been abandoned as a child by his mother. With so much in common, they explore a dense, magical forest in search of new aromatics together. Although Peipei feels in their closeness a baffling sense of distance, his subsequent betrayal hits her as a complete surprise.

The protagonist's solitary journey, partially inspired by the author's own life experiences, centers on honing her perfumery skills and, in the process, finding herself and pondering the true meaning of life. While the effect of aromatic perfumes on the senses may be pure magic, their chemical compounds, aromatic oils, and medicaments are all worldly substances. The joining of these two dimensions give perfumes their undeniable allure, while the entwining of experience and imagination nourish the soul and open the door to self-realization.



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PHANTASMIC PERFUME

By Ku Nai-Fang

Translated by Qing Zhao

01 Verdant Beast

The stairs were long and steep and, above them, swallows were busily building nests in the beams. Spring must be on its way, Peipei thought. She moved quickly past the management office and slipped into the courtyard garden, where a shimmer of mist hung above the evening shrubs. Her eyes, still adjusting to the light, stayed half-closed. Guided by memory, by scent alone, she climbed the side staircase. The studio, with its small sleeping loft set above a scent-blending workspace, was located on the second floor of the duplex. There was no doorbell. No matter. They were always able to tell whoever approached...they always knew.

The long wooden table was cluttered with brown bottles, each labeled with the name of a different fragrance ingredient. Plant specimens were soaking in three conical flasks: moss in pale green, violet leaves steeped in lake blue, and paper-thin, coffee-brown feathers suspended in a bark-colored tincture. A ceramic lamp, the room's only source of light, hung above the table. At night, it was just the two of them – a woman and a beast – seated at the table. Upon closer examination, the beast's features – eyes, nose, mouth – were notably hidden beneath a dense layer of brown hair. An orangutan sat upright in a chair, feet dangling just above the floor. Peipei was standing beside him, placing drops of fragrance onto scent strips, her narrow hand like the stem of a delicate flower as she waved the paper in front of his face.

"An," she said, "this...is May rose. Not as spicy as Damascus rose; more of a honeyed sweetness." She called him An. His nostrils fluttered, like a breeze catching the hem of a skirt, and then he let out a low, contented hum. He shook the table, and a few empty beakers tumbled to the floor. Fortunately, Peipei had already covered the tiles with crumpled newsprint and bubble wrap. Only one shattered. None struck their feet.

An was never overwhelmed by scent. Even when Peipei's nose went numb from volatile aromatics and alcohol, An could continue inhaling. Mastering the ability to distinguish the fragrances of various aromatic ingredients is the first step to becoming a perfumer. To tell stories through scent, you must first memorize the vocabulary. Smelling masterworks is also essential, like watching American TV drama series without subtitles. Over time, the meanings begin to stick. Scent often reveals itself through visual imagery. You unscrew the heavy lid of a perfume bottle and, as the top notes rise, an image begins to flicker across the wall. Tonight's scent film was *Rose Nacrée du Désert*, a discontinued Guerlain.

"The first note is oud," Peipei said, eyes closed. "Middle notes are rose and patchouli...a classic combo. One flower, one herb. I still don't see why this one's so popular." She waved the scent strip in the air. Peipei had explained it to An before: the best perfumes know how to transform. Hops, for instance, can smell like shrimp shells – fishy, slightly funky. But pair them

with rose, and that stench becomes a wild fizz; sexy as hell. Guerlain was a heritage house. Most of their blends leaned conservative, floral. Flowers, after all, were already fragrant by nature.

There wasn't a single risky note in *Rose Nacrée du Désert*. It was like heavy silk brocade – easy to wear, but never as daring as a cut-out design.

When An smelled a perfume he liked, he flailed his limbs in excitement. It was his one way of expressing joy. Sometimes Peipei would quiz him, asking him to replicate a master's work. That night, the challenge was *Bonsai*, last year's AOA winner; translucent, green, with a touch of Zen. The perfume world had gone mad for it. A Japanese garden in a bottle: wisteria, chrysanthemum, incense, black copal, cypress... But the one note that had everyone guessing was alligator juniper. She had searched everywhere, asked every distillery she could find. No one had heard of it. Even if you found the source, the proportions remained a mystery.

An stood on tiptoe, sniffing the rows of bottles on the metal shelf. The studio, aside from the single light over the table, was nearly dark. Light, after all, carried away the air, and with it, the scent. Peipei turned the bottles, trying to read the names on their labels. An had already picked out a few: juniper, rosemary, aglaia flower...

"Huh. No rosemary on the note breakdown," Peipei murmured. "No aglaia flower either." She didn't stop An, though. She was curious to see what he'd come up with on his own.

The ingredients he chose were whimsical: bergamot orange, lime, Buddha's hand, orange blossom. It seemed he had no intention of grounding these airy scents with sandalwood. He was unraveling the traditional fragrance pyramid, casting aside fruity tops, floral hearts, and woody foundations.

The orangutan's face appeared in the curved glass beaker – small light brown eyes, flared nostrils...fleshy cheeks framed in dry, wiry hair. An poured 50 milliliters of moss tincture into the beaker. Then, while adding aglaia flower, he lost his grip and dumped in the entire ten-ml bottle. Peipei winced. That was one of her priciest materials. A blast of longan honey rushed out. For a moment, it felt like they were standing in an orchard. As he stirred, the longan note faded and the juniper lifted. A translucent green note swept in. The amber liquid shimmered under the light – pure and unclouded, like a pot of honeyed oolong tea. An had recreated *Bonsai* perfectly. But it was too spontaneous. He couldn't write down the formula.

He flailed his limbs again to show how much he liked the scent. Then he pounded his chest, and his stomach let out a loud grumble. He always got ravenous after blending a perfume. The rosemary in *Bonsai* made it worse. He crawled across the floor to the fridge, rummaging for a raw egg. Peipei stopped him. "Not until it's cooked." When she brought him a bowl of udon noodles with a soft-boiled egg on top, An reached out with both hands and began scooping up the noodles.

"Use chopsticks," Peipei said. An fumbled with them awkwardly. With his rough, oversized hands and a body just 130 centimeters tall, managing two slender sticks of bamboo was no easy task. Whenever Peipei wasn't looking, he simply used his hands.

An was drawn to the scent of Peipei's skin – a blend of May rose and frankincense. Whenever she called his name, he would crouch down, flare his nostrils, and inhale her scent in deep, greedy breaths. He also liked it when it thundered, making Peipei shiver, her skin giving off

a scent of warm cereal with a hint of carrot. When Peipei wasn't home, An would go out to the garden to eat snails and pee next to the flowerpots.

Peipei loved the jasmine scent on An's skin, what perfumers called "indole" – a nitrogen compound. At high concentrations, it gave off a sickly-sweet, musty staleness, like excrement or urine. But in trace amounts, it blossomed into a faint, soul-stirring jasmine fragrance. Fragrance enthusiasts said indole was the scent of decay in bloom, the final breath of a flower before it's buried in the earth. To Peipei, the presence of indole turned a flower feral, stirring the beast that slept deep within.

On summer nights, Peipei and An liked to pick jasmine blossoms. They would bring out a silver aluminum tray, spread it with cold fat, and layer the flowers on top. After about five days, they replaced them, repeating the process ten times or more. The fat, saturated with jasmine's breath, became a precious pomade – later steeped into tincture, the DNA of a floral perfume.

An had great stamina. He memorized scent materials in the morning, sorted them in the afternoon, and studied masterworks at night. During breaks, he liked to eat udon noodles with eggs, slurping away as he flipped on the TV to watch the animal channel. An picked things up fast. Once shown the categories, he could break down any scent sample at hand. Ink from a ballpoint pen smells like plastic mixed with bitter orange. Soy sauce, when broken down, reveals caramel, black spruce, and vanilla. Cedar carries a woody sweetness – ambergris does too – with a nutty undertone that pairs surprisingly well with soy sauce.

An was a natural at perfumery. Every day brought new discoveries and insights. But he never wrote down his formulas, throwing materials together like a wild animal, driven by instinct. Peipei had started young, at nineteen. Now she had ten years of experience and a solid following, mostly overseas. Taiwanese don't tend to support local fragrances, falling in tow with the widespread belief that scents from beyond the island simply smell better. Peipei's most loyal followers tended to come from Europe and America. The one-human, one-beast household got by on selling perfume. Perfume could be traded for money, and money for udon noodles and eggs. That was how An understood it.

"Miss Wei, sending out more packages?" said Mr. Wang, the building manager. Five or six boxes blocked Peipei's face as she made her way down the stairs. "Business is booming!" he added – just as he always did, though he never once offered to help carry anything.

Afternoons were always for packing and sending out orders. All Peipei could hear was the rustle and snap of tape as it peeled from the roll. She liked to cut it clean with a Swiss Army knife and, when the work was done, she would absentmindedly slip the knife into her pocket. By the time everything was shipped, she was spent. She'd step out into the courtyard garden for some air. One whistle, and An would come running down. He'd crouch at her feet and sniff the rose scent clinging to her ankles. When they went out walking, groups of middle schoolers in uniform would stare at An in disbelief. Then the laughter would invariably start, and one of them would swing their arms low, lurch forward in mimicry, and scratch their body theatrically. An didn't realize they were imitating him. He would even laugh along. When he walked, his arms dangled so low they nearly touched the ground. Once, on the way back from a walk, Mr. Wang pointed at An and said,

“Why do you keep such a strange-looking dog?” Little did he know, An could understand him. He snapped, tearing through the garden and knocking over every flowerpot in sight.

Stems broke. Strange fragrance burst forth. Grass twisted and bled green.

Scent unlocked something in An. Soy sauce seeped into his thoughts and settled deep in his body, wrapping him in a sense of home. To him, it carried the feeling of a door swinging open and a voice saying, “You’re home.” Two weeks after they met, he created his first soy-sauce-themed perfume.

It was 100 milliliters; an eau de parfum at twenty percent concentration. The caramel note was overpowering – sharply aggressive. Top, heart, and base arrived out of order, crashing through in thick, uneven waves. Peipei called it interesting but rough, like bold strokes of paint slapped together without gradation or depth. Primitive, she said. Even the ancient Egyptians had more refined methods. An poured *Dashing Soy Sauce* straight into a round perfume bottle and held it up to the lamp. Light slid across the thin glass, softening time. Then he sprayed.

“Caramel is supposed to be a finishing note,” Peipei said. “You’ve drowned it. Perfume needs structure – top, heart, base. This is just a heap of smells.”

She picked up a pen and began sketching a formula. “One percent caramel, three percent guaiac wood, five percent black spruce, one percent vanilla...something like that.”

She paused, then added, “But most important is the mood you wish to convey or the story you’re trying to tell. Just because you like udon noodles with soy sauce doesn’t mean you need to make a soy sauce perfume. That’s just indulgent.” An made a face, tugging down his eyelid with one big, calloused hand. His pale brown eyes bulged, unsettling and unreadable.

For his second attempt, Peipei set up the workspace. On the wooden table, everything was neatly laid out: labeled ingredients, clean beakers, tinctures, a pen, and a notebook.

“Write it down this time,” she reminded him.

But An was restless. He bounced in front of the television like he was trying to shake something loose. Peipei put on *Drums of Death*, a field recording of a funeral rhythm made in Ghana. As the drums began, An climbed onto the chair and beat his chest. The ceramic lamp swayed. Bottles trembled on the table. As the rhythm quickened, sweat poured down his body. With a final groan, he reached for the brown glass bottles on the cart, grabbing each in time with the beat.

Buddha’s hand. Moss. Moss. More moss. Labdanum. Buddha’s hand. Tobacco, tobacco, tobacco. Cedar, cedar, cedar. Labdanum.

Peipei tracked the labels on the brown bottles, jotting down his scent score. She could almost hear what he heard. The crisp snap of the drumhead felt like Buddha’s hand. The thud against the drum’s wooden rim echoed the resin of labdanum.

An picked up a beaker and followed his own score, adding materials with no measure. He added moss three times in a row – too much, too little, whatever felt right. He didn’t care for proportions. He worked by instinct. While stirring, he gripped the glass rod too hard. It snapped in his hand. Shards fell into the beaker. He knocked it to the floor. The scent burst into the air – wild, delirious, haunted by the singing of dark spirits. Peipei bent down and drew up what she

could with a dropper. This one was a step forward; the notes no longer surged in clumps, each molecule swimming at its own pace. The overall impression was lighter, more transparent; a leisurely sketch of the countryside.

Maybe by next December, they'd be ready for AOA – the Art and Olfaction Awards. The Oscars of independent perfumery, held every year in the U.S. If they won, the recognition might drift back to Taiwan. Maybe then, Peipei thought, people here would finally believe in their scents.

When Peipei felt happy, she smelled like lavender mixed with frankincense – soft, airy. An could smell her shifting moods. Anger was saffron: dry and dusty with a trace of pepper. But it was fear he loved most: carrot seed, cereal, and soil. It made his stomach rumble.

The name of the fan page for their perfumery was “BEBE”. But when she checked it the next morning, she noticed someone had changed it to “CHABEBE”. She took it down immediately.

“Who renamed us Chia Peipei?” she asked. An grinned, baring a sharp little canine. “It's supposed to be ‘BE’, as in Taipei.” She rolled her eyes. “Probably Monica. Hacked into our fan page.” Peipei muttered as she scrolled through the login history.

“Some people just can't stand to see others succeed. Monica had been the first perfumer in Taiwan to launch her own brand. Her father was a tea farmer, so she had access to premium green tea absolutes. For over a decade, her perfumes had revolved around tea.” Peipei pulled up Monica's fan page and showed it to An.

“That one – *Mademoiselle*. I still don't know how to pronounce it. Ma-te-something. People in the perfume world just call it MM.” An tilted his head, confused. “Forget it. You wouldn't care anyway,” she said. She then proceeded to create a new fan page and rewrote the description, figuring it might serve as a backup.

Outside of blending formulas, Peipei also had to write her own perfume blurbs. She found these to be tedious. If you can smell something, why not let the scent speak for itself? But for people who'd never caught a whiff, words were a lure and, at best, a way to seduce. Still, when it came to describing herself, she drew a blank.

I'm Peipei, a perfumer. I raise a little beast who's better than me at making perfume.

But An wasn't her child. Could she really say “raise”? And “beast” – sure...it grabs attention, but An would hate it.

I'm Peipei, a perfumer. I run a studio with my apprentice, An. Our clientele are all over the world, with the exception of Taiwan.

That line felt snide. “Apprentice” didn't sit right either. Start over.

Perfume by BEBE. A fragrance brand founded by Peipei. Now working with emerging perfumer An to explore the untamed side of scent.

That settled it. Time to take out the trash.

Mr. Wang poked his head out from the management office. “One of the residents says the second-floor hallway smells a bit over the top today.”

“So, *too fragrant* is a problem now?” Peipei replied. Scent, by nature, insists on taking up space and has no respect for boundaries. She looked at Mr. Wang – thin, flat, dark-skinned, narrow-eyed. He reminded her of a rat. Once, while walking beneath the arcade with An, a rat had fallen

from above and landed right in front of her. It'd scared the hell out of her. The studio at No. 284 Wuxing Street sat too close to the night market. One step outside, and you were hit by a riot of food smells. Maybe it was time to move.

An liked climbing Elephant Mountain in the dead of night. Peipei didn't. The red-lit temple on the slope unsettled her. You never knew what might dart out from behind the shrines. So, An went while she slept. Up there, no one laughed at how he looked. He could go barefoot and let the branches rake across his body like they were grooming him.

He liked standing at the summit, staring out at the city lights. Up there, there were no rules. No chopsticks, no forced smiles, no need for Peipei to act as translator between him and the world. If he could, he thought, he might live on this mountain. But he also loved the scent of old Taipei apartment buildings. The exposed wiring reminded him of longan wood burning in a campfire. Not just the thrill of something about to catch, but that smoky fruit note. It made him hungry. And hunger, for him, meant he was alive.

Coming down from Elephant Mountain, he let his arms swing low, brushing the ground as he ran. Light-footed and silent, he slipped through the streets, up the long flight of stairs, and through door. Peipei stirred in her sleep.

"Why does it smell burnt? Where were you?" she squinted at him. An said nothing. His small, pale brown eyes narrowed to slits.

A month later, he made *Blood Perfume*. He had discovered the dry-down of palmarosa grass had a blood-like tang. "An, what did you use for the base?" Peipei asked, waving a scent strip. "There's a mucous texture; not quite resinous." The burgundy liquid glistened on the strip like bruised fruit.

An gave a wicked grin, arms slack at his sides, and darted out to the balcony. He returned with a sealed jar. Peering in, his pale brown eyes met the alcohol. A buttery yellow slime floated on top. Beneath it, a heap of snail corpses.

"My tinctures are all plant-based," Peipei said. "Moss, tobacco, pu-erh tea cakes. You're soaking animal remains. That's disturbing." She took one look and ran to the sink to vomit. An reached for a bark-colored tincture on the table. Inside, paper-thin, coffee-brown feathers drifted in the liquid. He pointed at it, meaning: that one, too, had once held something dead.

"Shellac, huh? Are you saying I'm not vegan either? I bought that from a Chinese medicine store! You – you're the one who killed those snails." Her nostrils flared.

An held the wine-red bottle of *Blood Perfume*. Snail mucus still glossed his lips. He crouched down and sprayed the perfume at her ankle.

"What are you doing?" she said.

The scent bloomed. The palmarosa opened with a dry, grassy bite, then turned to blood. The heart note carried a metallic edge, like an impossibly astringent green tea. The dry-down began sour, then thickened into something viscous. The whole thing reeked of a cannibal's kitchen.