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ESSAY

Should an Old Fragrance Be Forgotten

A writer's quest for his father's discontinued Italian aftershave

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By ANDRÉ ACIMAN

In many places around the globe, tradition has it that on New Year's Eve you must throw something out the window. The gesture has at least three goals: to make room for new beginnings. It is also a way of "giving back" and not be accused of hogging. And finally it's how we get rid of stuff that's been weighing on us. At the stroke of midnight, the clatter of old china and crockery crashing on the sidewalks in cities around the world reminds you that even in hard times, this ritual is still in practice. Around midnight, avoid sidewalks.



Alan Witschonke

But New Year's Eve is also a time for reckoning and measuring time. We take a look at the real and metaphorical balance sheet of our life. Profits? Hardly any. Mistakes? All over the place. Losses? Huge, and getting worse. If you're as superstitious as I am, you know you have to throw something out by midnight if only to appease the gods with a final, declarative toss. Hurling things out, however, is not supposed to be too easy. You don't get rid of something you never wanted. Rather, you must part with something, you must sacrifice it. Otherwise it won't count. Old snowshoes, very old cashmere sweater, every Hermès tie you've owned and will never want to be seen with again, DVDs you'll probably never watch in this lifetime, the Fast-Abs paraphernalia you've never assembled and never, ever, ever will. Not to be confused with those things that are sacred and which you have to keep, even if you're dying to get rid of them.

For some, however, New Year's is not so much a time for throwing things out as for trying to bring them back: neglected friendships that have been sitting on the brink; comatose objects we continue to own but can't do a thing with: old printers, defunct laptops, expired DustBusters. And what about those books and CDs people borrowed and never returned and are now permanently out of print?

This is where the Internet comes in. My high-school English textbook: after 40 years, I found it on eBay for less than \$5. I would have paid \$100 to own it. "Crime and Punishment," No. 89 in the Classics Illustrated comics series: resurrected from oblivion through a friend of a friend of a friend. "Wuthering Heights" in its orange-white-orange Penguin edition: found in a second-hand bookstore in London. Then there are the unrecoverables, things they don't make any longer. That special 18-year-old blended Scotch whiskey: never again! This live-recording of "The Well-Tempered Clavier" taped in Austria: gone underground! Those wonderful shoes made in Scandinavia: they're made in China now. As for David Frost interviewing Maria Callas: in your dreams!

* * *

The list of things I'm trying to recover grows longer by the year. About a year ago this time, I set out to buy my father his favorite aftershave cologne, Aria di Parma.

It had a very delicate and self-effacing scent: citrus as a high note, a nuance of blossom in its midtones, and something spicy as a base, but very elusive, so that citrus always returned as the dominant. My father was terminally ill and I wanted him to have it because he'd occasionally ask for a bottle. But when I went to pick one up for him, the only men's store that carried it -- Battaglia, on the corner of Park Avenue and 57th Street -- had moved. When I asked the doorman in the apartment building next door, he had no recollection of such a store. I spotted an older doorman in a building across Park Avenue, and he seemed to remember, but vaguely: Closed years ago!

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Jennifer Keiminger (photo illustration), Jacqueline Chambard (portrait photos)

No problem, I would look it up on the Internet. On the Internet, though, not a trace of Battaglia in New York City. There was only a Battaglia in Beverly Hills. So I called the store. Yes, they were related to the old flagship in New York, but now they were the only store bearing that name, and as for Aria di Parma, "we may have carried it once, but not any longer." So I Googled Aria di Parma. A slew of things came up, but not what I was looking for. Not on eBay or on any of the myriad online perfume suppliers in the U.S. and

Europe. Everyone, when I did manage to reach a live voice, kept trying to convince me that I was looking for Acqua di Parma. No, not Acqua, but Aria -- please! I know the difference. I even found myself calling the Osmothèque, the world-famous perfume museum in Versailles, France. No, monsieur, never heard of it. Click.

And yet my father had been buying it for years. I was resolved to get it for him, among other reasons because I had promised and had made it sound so easy. But I began to panic. I knew this was his last year, and I desperately wanted to get my hands on a bottle for Christmas.

Then I had a brainstorm. The man in charge of Battaglia years ago was named Vincent Marchese. I remembered his name because my father's size was always small, and as soon as something his size arrived from Italy, Mr. Marchese would always call my father to let him know. The next morning, I sat myself down, looked up all the Vincent Marcheses on anyone.com and began dialing each one in New York and New Jersey. I felt like one of those disheveled police

inspectors slamming the white pages on his desk and calling each person bearing a suspect's last name. But none of them answered or, when they did, had never heard of Battaglia.

In the end I landed on a woman. She had a beefy, matronly voice. Yes, there was a Vincent Marchese, but Vincent could not come to the phone. Should I call later? No. I told you, he can't come to the phone! When I politely inquired why, she said: "Because he don't hear so good." I put on the most deferential voice I could muster and asked her to ask him if he could tell me whom I should call if I wanted to know about a men's cologne sold at Battaglia.

She tried to relay the message, and when he started to mutter something in the background she replied that she couldn't understand a word he was saying. She finally told me that the best thing would be to call old Mrs. Battaglia and gave me the number. No sooner I hung up than I called Mrs. Battaglia.

Mrs. Battaglia's knowledge about her husband's business was limited, and her husband had died years ago. All she could do was refer me to Maus & Hoffman, a high-end men's specialty store with a main branch in Palm Beach, Fla., that still carried one of the Battaglia colognes. I hung up and after dialing the number in Florida went through my spiel all over again. The secretary would be glad to send me a sample of Acqua Amara, which I did remember, since my father had also purchased that cologne at Battaglia, but they did not carry Aria di Parma. Would she be kind enough to tell me how I might get in touch with the manufacturer in Italy? No, she was not at liberty to give me that information. I tried to flaunt my credentials to prove I had no intention of entering the perfume business. Nothing doing. The hunt ended in complete failure.

* * *

Months later, after my father died and I was sorting through his things, I did find in a bottom drawer a totally emptied bottle of Aria di Parma. My father was a sentimentalist and had kept the bottle on a bookcase, either as a memento of something long lost or as a reminder to buy a new one some day.

Something -- maybe it was my way of avoiding grief -- made me want to renew the search. I decided to call Maus & Hoffman again and, with no clue as to whether Maus even existed, asked to speak to Mr. Maus himself. The woman answering the telephone stumped me: "Junior or Senior?" I had to make a quick decision: Senior might be moved by my search for long-lost things, but he might be suspicious or, worse yet, not remember Battaglia at all. Junior, on the other hand, might not care for nostalgia but might be intrigued by why a writer was calling. I asked for Junior, knowing that within minutes, our conversation could easily come to an end.

Instead, from this one phone call an email friendship blossomed. Tom Maus Jr. did remember the cologne in question, as he too remembered Battaglia. I explained that I was calling in search of my father's cologne and that I was hoping he could lead me to its source in Italy. "You should speak to Giovanni Ribero in Milan," he said. Giovanni, it turned out, was still in the scent business and was the son of the original creator of Aria di Parma, who had died long since. I was getting closer.

As I had to be in Milan that summer, I made a point of meeting Giovanni there. He showed up at my hotel lobby and told me the story of his family. The company, he explained, had started with his grandfather, a flower merchant of distant Spanish origin in San Remo who had begun to distill Bulgarian roses. This would become his son's specialty. Unfortunately, both father and son had died, and the company was now almost entirely devoted to industrial scents (for hotel lobbies, large stores, restaurants) and to bath products. Giovanni opened up his attaché case and produced at least eight sample bottles of perfumes. One of them was bound to be Aria di Parma. I hadn't smelled my father's scent in years, but I would recognize it in no time. When he made me smell the eight bottles in question, my heart sank. Not one was remotely similar.

I asked if he had at least a sample of Aria di Parma. He did not.

One again, the trail had gone completely cold.

* * *

And then, out of the blue one month later, I received an email from Tom Maus: "Trovato, found it."

Within weeks, both Giovanni and I received envelopes containing a sample from Maus & Hoffman. Giovanni responded that he recognized it immediately and would have it analyzed for all of its ingredients. To bribe him, I sent him one of my favorite CDs, of which I have stored many copies in case it too disappears some day: Murray Perahia playing Handel's piano suites.

No sooner had I opened the small glass container than there it was -- like a genie trapped in his lamp: the memory of my father. The citrus is still there, though somewhat murky and occluded; it hasn't been aired in years and has lost that unmistakably lithe and graceful curlicue that I remembered on my father whenever he wore Aria di Parma. But it is, undeniably, my father. My father getting ready to go to work in the morning. My father when we met for drinks once before going to a concert. My father when I ran into someone who looked like him outside of the tennis courts and, before realizing it, knew from the scent that, yes, this could only have been Dad.

All of this, an entire lifetime, all in a tiny vial of men's cologne.

I have no intention of letting go of it. At least not until Giovanni brings back his father's perfume, the one that brings back my father each time.

André Aciman is chairman of the Ph.D. program in comparative literature at the CUNY Graduate Center. He also wrote the novel "Call Me by Your Name" and "Out of Egypt: A Memoir."

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