

SPELLS AND POTIONS: ON THE SCENT STRIP



Smell is often understood as a mnemonic medium for traveling backwards in time, but it can also be used to travel forwards. I started writing around the same time I first smelled the Marc Jacobs *Oh, Lola!* perfume advertisement featuring Dakota Fanning. Because I was thirteen, I had just started middle school, and with it, my first magazine subscription. It was seventh grade and at the same time there was *Seventeen*. Because Dakota Fanning was seventeen but “looked under the age of sixteen,” the ad was banned in the U.K.¹ It was suggested by the Advertising Standards Authority that the flower-shaped perfume bottle positioned between her legs might be a symbol for something else (which is what symbols always are). I had never read *Lolita*. I looked under the age of thirteen. The cheerleaders in my grade looked over the age of sixteen. It follows that I was not a cheerleader. For example, my first friend in my new town wasn’t allowed to hang out after school because she had to stay home and read the dictionary. I stayed home and read *Seventeen*—but above all, I smelled it. The eyes of Dakota Fanning were completely clear and lifeless, much like the fake eyes on the wings of moths, and you actually did not need to read, or even see, in order to understand *Seventeen*, which was basically a series of advertisements camouflaged as a magazine. Best of these were the perfume pages, which at first looked like they were images but were actually themselves miniature magazines: paper flaps to be unfolded and inhaled by the 12- to 21-year-old female reader. These were called “scent strips,” and I liked the process of peeling glossy recto from sticky verso to reveal the glue underneath—sort of, I guess, like Dakota Fanning spreading her legs for Juergen Teller. The perfumes in the scent strips always smelled exactly the same: like ink, paper, and glue. To this day, when I wear perfume, it is partly to smell like a magazine.

Dakota Fanning was, at that time, a cheerleader (Vikings, blue-and-yellow) at a private school in Studio City forty miles due west of my own. At El Roble Intermediate, our cheerleaders (Panthers, red-and-black) did not wear *Oh, Lola!*; in fact, they didn’t wear “perfume” at all. Instead, they wore one of twelve color-coded flavors of Victoria’s Secret PINK Body Mist. These included “warm & cozy” (red), “lovely & true” (royal purple), “cheeky & bright” (yellow), “wild & breezy” (turquoise), “cool & carefree” (lavender), “soft & dreamy” (blue), and “pretty & pure” (mint). I imagined that these adjectives matched their respective personalities perfectly. To me, the cheerleaders seemed a little like dictionaries: highly literal. Would a

1 thecut.com/2013/01/dakota-fanning-marc-jacobs-was-in-stitches-over-banned-ad.html

2 “Like so many of mankind’s truly pioneering inventions, the ability to make magazine pages redolent was an accidental byproduct of a search for something else.” www.nytimes.com/1988/03/27/magazine/overpowering-the-scent-market.html

3 Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964, ruling on pornography: indescribable, but “I know it when I see it.”

rose by any other name smell as sweet? A cheerleader would say, *no, a Panther is a Panther*. At least to my knowledge, they did not symbolize in secret, nor did they have what *Seventeen* called “style.” A cheerleader was a cheerleader because she wore a red-and-black El Roble Panthers cheerleading uniform. Each cheerleader’s uniform was embroidered with her first name. Every afternoon, the Panthers misted their Body Mist onto their bodies in the locker room, then ran out into the bright green field and somersaulted themselves into stars and pyramids, twisted folded looped and spat out into the air: perfectly empty of meaning, painfully full of life.

In seventh grade, in search of what I guess you’d call “something else,” I turned away from everything cool & carefree and towards darker arts. According to the *New York Times*, scent strips are produced by a “solutions” company named “Webcraft.”² During the manufacturing process, sheets of paper are “printed, twisted, glued, folded, looped, glued again, coated with the slurry, sealed and spit out the other end” of magical and patented machines. Once inserted into the pages of a magazine, they have been inscribed not with meaning but with the very same substance one might wish to extract from teenage cheerleaders, something like a future or a life: thousands of fragrant bubbles, that, upon “reading,” will burst—releasing an advertising solution. The stories I wrote at age thirteen, which revolved around sixteen-year-olds who attended a magic school in which they learned spells and potions, functioned similarly. Spells, like the gestural name “*Oh, Lola!*” or the cheerleading anthem “Go Panthers!”, were words, spoken with a wave of the hand and a certain inflection of voice, that caused something to happen. Potions were combinations of rare ingredients that you could take to change your life. I always wanted words to do more than they mean. I also wanted a perfume, to become other than I’d been.

For this reason, the descriptive function of a Body Mist—even if there had existed a VS PINK flavor called “strange & secretive”—held little appeal. I didn’t like being told what to do, think, or expect. In other words, I was a contrarian. Perhaps this is why it is easier to say why I did *not* want *Oh Lola!* than why I did. I did not want *Oh, Lola!* because of the name Marc Jacobs or the fame of Dakota Fanning. I didn’t know who Juergen Teller was, anyways. And I had, at that point, never actually smelled *Oh, Lola!*, not counting the ad’s glue-y scent strip, or really any perfume aside from the ones you might mix at a tween b-day party at the “fragrance lab” in the Village downtown (my mom didn’t wear scent)—so it’s also *not* that I wanted the perfume for its actual smell, *nor* for some idea of what it would mean to smell like something. I had no use, real or imagined, for fragrance. I was not fantasizing about wearing *Oh, Lola!* while making out with the Panthers’ hottest football player (quarterback) *and* surfer, Ray Dahlstrom (that is his real name); nor of, by some commutative principle, becoming a child star like Dakota Fanning—as many girls in my grade did.

I wanted something else. Like porn, obviously though ineffably³, this something still bubbles between the ink and the page of that flat pink-and-cream photograph, and it seems to have been concentrated in a translucent, vase-like base topped by a spray of plastic petals in magenta,

pink, and fuchsia. At age thirteen I didn’t just want the *bottle of Oh, Lola!*; after all I was a teenager, and past the age of toys. What I wanted was a kind of holographic thing promised by the alchemical convergence of these elements: the scent, the bottle, the photo, the name, and whatever future self would appear on my skin because of them. Like all desires, the shape this wish took was both synecdochic and uber-dimensional: it could only ever have fit inside the bottle of *Oh, Lola!* depicted in the advertisement, which, I realize now, is not to scale. The magic object nestled in Fanning’s lap is actually a prop, fabricated in an oversize version for the shoot. This trajectory of an inappropriately growing and shrinking thing left invisibly in the photograph is probably what makes Fanning look like Alice in Wonderland (young), and what made the Advertising Standards Authority recognize a fantasy, and what makes it a perfect example of an advertisement. No matter the size, every perfume bottle is extra-dimensional, because the thing inside it is invisible and basically indescribable, too.

As I would later discover at Sephora, age sixteen, *Oh, Lola!* is an unremarkable fragrance. Its top notes are Raspberry, Pear, and Strawberry. Its middle notes are Peony, Magnolia, and Cyclamen and its base notes are Vanilla, Sandalwood, and Tonka Bean. Of course, these words tell most of us exactly nothing about what *Oh, Lola!* smells like. It’s easier to imagine Vanilla, Sandalwood, and Tonka Bean as the names of cheerleaders than as descriptions. Words, unlike spells, cannot effectively simulate perfume. Perhaps this is because perfume is itself the simulation of a completely unrealistic situation that would never occur outside of a Webcraft lab or a middle school. Words really only make sense in a familiar context. A context like a specific time and place or piece of paper. Smells, on the other hand, once released, go backwards, forwards, and everywhere, associatively and a-structurally. They are extremely misleading. Perhaps that is why, at this point in the analysis, my ideas and analogies about cheerleaders and perfumes have become somewhat confused. But thankfully, unlike words, perfumes work perfectly well without making any sense at all. A perfume bottle is not really a container (sign or symbol); it is a charm. As Fanning told *Glamour* in the wake of her advertisement’s ban, “If you want to read something into a perfume bottle, then I guess you can.” ●