

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

**The New World Odour**

*There is an army of diseases under the Demon Pestilence stalking among us . . . The vanguard of that army is invariably Stink.*

Charles Henry Piesse, *Olfactics and the Physical Senses*

I had a number of reasons for going to Germany. A less-than-lethal weapons symposium was only the official one. Professor Hans Rindisbacher was willing to meet with me to discuss the importance of smell in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. He said my research was timely and he'd be glad to discuss his own conclusions. 'I am sure you have heard about the former East German Stasi (secret police),' his email read. 'If you don't mind I'll take you for a little excursion in Berlin.'

A copy of Gustav Jaeger's *Origins of the Soul* had arrived at Werner Pieper's house. He'd had a hard time tracking it down and I was worried in case the book turned out to be irrelevant to the Dogwatch project, particularly

since I'd learned that Jaeger's name was synonymous with woollen underwear, which Jaeger had designed for hygienic purposes in the nineteenth century. I'd seen Jaeger's *Origins of the Soul* referred to in a paper on the history of smell in literature but no one else seemed to have heard of it. Jaeger, a zoologist and contemporary of Charles Darwin, reportedly reckoned that scent was the seat of the soul. I hoped his thesis might explain my instinctive distrust of olfactory surveillance.

On the short flight from Stansted to Berlin, I read an article in the *New York Times* about how Soviet interrogation techniques formed the basis for the new style of 'enemy combatant' interrogations in the United States. A psychiatrist at Yale University asked: 'How did something we used as an example of what an unethical government would do become something we do?'

Outside Hackescher Market Station, I sat on the steps, looking out for what I imagined a professor of German literature might look like. The process was an awkward one. Most of the 40-year-old men I made eye contact with returned my gaze as if they too were looking for someone I might be. When Hans turned up, he didn't look like any of the men I'd been eyeing up. I'd made a clumsy mental picture of him from his curriculum vitae. Of Swiss origin, he was educated at the University of Bern and Stanford University and was now professor of German studies at Pomona College, California. He had wide-ranging literary, historical and philosophical interests and the olfactory publications stood out intriguingly amongst them. He'd published a book called *The Smell of Books* since his presentation on *Brave New World* at the Aldous Huxley Centenary Symposium and even taught a post-graduate course on smell in literature. I thought he'd be wearing glasses and a beige corduroy jacket with dark brown elbow patches on the jacket sleeves. But the man

standing in front of me was far too funky for such garb. He was fashionably dressed, LA. Black and cream-striped trousers hugged his long, toned legs and his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm for life. Though his hair was grey, his face shone with youthful exuberance.

He greeted me with a palm pressed against each of my upper arms and a kiss on both cheeks. 'So nice to meet you Amber,' he said, stepping back to hold me at arm's length while smiling warmly into my face. I'd not expected him to have a Californian accent.

'Come,' he said softly. Waving his left arm in the air, he stretched his right leg out in front of us. 'Let's take a walk.'

'It's always nice to meet someone who shares an interest in smell,' I said shyly, slightly overwhelmed by his zest and not sure how else to start.

'For me too. Particularly someone whose research is not strictly chemical, behavioural or dealing with odour abatement! What you are doing sounds very interesting and timely.'

I followed Hans through the market and on to the main road.

'So you've heard of the Stasi?' he asked.

'Yes! They're one of the things that got me interested in olfactory policing.'

'Good, well, if you don't mind, I thought we could visit their former headquarters here in Berlin. They have turned it into a museum.'

'Wonderful.'

As we walked down the Frankfurter Allee, Hans pointed out the Soviet architecture. Huge monolithic apartment blocks lined the streets, 'the monumental classicism of the Stalin years'.

'You know that the police here in Germany have been accused of reviving Stasi methods? It was on the radio

this morning,' he said as we strode down the pavement together.

'Really?'

'Yes, they've been collecting human scents to trace anti-globalisation activists they believe may try to disrupt the G8 summit in June. They have been confiscating sweaty vests and getting well-known radicals to impregnate steel pipes with their hand odour to present to their German shepherds.'

'What's the public reaction been?'

'Outrage, because of the Stasi connotations. And of course the German shepherd dog is synonymous with Nazis here in Germany.'

'Yes, I was wondering about the relationship between dogs and Nazis – do you know much about it? A German friend told me that SS officers had to fight a Doberman before being recruited.'

'I don't know about that. Adolf Hitler's faithful companion, Blondi, a German shepherd, was with him in the Reichstag bunker in Berlin. He killed himself after poisoning Blondi. Certainly the German shepherd is welded in the collective memory of the Nazis. The good thing about Germany today is its sensitivity to fascist politics.' I'd noticed this on visits I'd made to see my friend Käte in South Germany. Most of her friends, very few of whom could be described as rabid anarchists, and many of whom were respectable professionals, had anti-fascism stickers on their walls and windows.

'So how does Huxley use smell in *Brave New World*? I ventured, wary of wasting our short time together talking dogs, without any idea of where the museum was and fearful we'd arrive there before I could find out about his thesis.'

'He employs it as a technocratic means of social control. Pretty amazing, when you think about it, the way he anticipated a development in the olfactory realm

that has only recently been discussed with any degree of seriousness.'

'I've not really heard it talked about outside specialist circles.'

'Oh, a number of people have called the twenty-first century *'das Jahrhundert des geruch'*, the century of odour. The nose has gained in stature. This gain is reflected, for instance, in a more aggressive stance by the perfume industry and the exploding artificial fragrance and flavour business. I think the first newspaper reference I saw to the social implications of environmental fragrancing systems was in the 1990s, in the *Wall Street Journal*. In it, executives of a leading fragrance manufacturer acknowledged that smells of the future could be potent enough to put smell suppliers in competition with the pharmaceutical industry. A former chairman acknowledged that the dark side of these developments was mind control. And a number of companies have found that adults are fond of the scents in products they used as a child, like baby powder, and are looking into fragrancing new baby products with this in mind. The fact that early childhood exposure to certain odours forms attachments that go on forever is already built into their profit calculations.'

'So are many people using these environmental fragrancing systems?' I asked, distracted from *Brave New World* by his insight into the world around me.

'Well I haven't really kept up to date with developments. But already in the 1990s, these systems were operating in hotel resorts, healthcare facilities, retail stores and office buildings in the US, Europe and Japan. The concept of adding scent to the architectural design process was just beginning to develop then.' I thought about the counter-terror conference and the talk about incorporating security features into our physical environment. The ventilation systems were already in place.

'And Huxley predicted these developments?'

'Very much so. You know how odours came to be associated with disease in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the authorities sought to eliminate them?'

'Yes.' I'd seen pictures of the plague doctor's dress that had haunted me in my sleep. The head and body fully cloaked, only one of the doctor's eyes was ever visible through the bird beaked facemask used to fend off the odours of the sick. The enormous pelican-like beak would be filled with protective aromatics. So paranoid were some physicians about contracting illness from the volatiles of disease that, according to a source cited in Alain Corbin's *The Foul and The Fragrant*, one doctor claimed to notice, after having spent a day in the company of corpses, that his 'wind produced an odour very similar to theirs'. In fact, the discovery that black absorbs odours more readily than white led scientists to recommend that physicians change the colour of their black cloaks and that the walls of medical establishments be painted white.

'Well,' Hans continued, 'in the *Brave New World* smells are no longer something to be eliminated by the system, but rather something to be exploited by it. They become a tool for manipulation of the masses.'

'How?'

'The old world stinks, the new is full of pleasant scents, and the olfactory is used as a political instrument of control over the individual. In the new world, olfaction has developed its own technological apparatus and can be implemented effectively for political and psychological purposes.'

'What technological apparatuses?'

'The perfumed plumbing system, the soma vapour guns, the scent organs. Smells are a communal turn-on, directed at nobody in particular. In *Brave New World* we

see the mass application of de-individualised olfactory standards in the name of maintaining social stability. The brave new world is thoroughly sanitised and standardised, medically and hygienically controlled. The public and private spheres have been cleansed of unpleasant odours and are periodically infused with good smells from specialised equipment.'

'It's a bit like the smoking ban and pub chains,' I said. I'd argued endlessly over the implications of the smoking ban with friends and pseudo-libertarians. What got to me most was the lack of resistance to it from smokers. 'It'll help me give up,' they'd say. But in opting for external control, weren't they giving up the ghost? I'd throw in the fact that Hitler was the first politician to propose a smoking ban for rhetorical purposes, as Werner Pieper had told me he was, but my real fear was that it was the sign of a trend that would see us obliged to jog in the morning on the government's orders. We'd need to take care of ourselves for the good of the *Volk*. I'd heard talk about how midwives are advising parents that if either smokes, the baby should sleep in a separate bed because during the night, nicotine will 'escape from their blood' and 'penetrate the baby's skin'. Even the smoker's breath was described as 'potentially harmful' to the newborn. Things were definitely getting out of hand. Bill Durodié, senior lecturer in Risk and Corporate Security at Cranfield University argues that we are beginning to see everything through 'the prism of risk' and that our growing intolerance is a symptom of a 'mass psychogenic illness'. Whatever the causes, the result was that if I decided to open up a smoke-filled jazz bar, I *wasn't allowed to*. Most people agree that any risk from passive smoking is too small to panic about. The principal objection to smoking in public among those I've asked is 'the smell'. In fact, to everyone's surprise, the stench from pubs has become unbearable as a result of the smoking ban and they are now being pumped

full of synthetic scents, including some sold as subliminal mood enhancers to encourage beer consumption.

'Yes.' Hans laughed. 'As Mustapha Mond says in *Brave New World*, "There isn't any need for a civilized man to bear anything that's seriously unpleasant".'

'Why was Huxley so preoccupied with the growth of science and technology and the impact it would have on autonomy and liberty?' I asked him.

'Well, if you think about the time he was writing *Brave New World*. It was between the wars. The catastrophe of the First World War can be seen as the culmination of a belief in technological feasibility that, combined with a reckless imperialism, spells utter disregard for the individual human being. For the generation of the first two decades of the twentieth century the experience of the war with its mass deaths – due, precisely, to new technologies such as the machine gun, the aeroplane, or poison gas – was a formative psychological experience.'

'I guess so. Huxley became very concerned, didn't he, about military involvement in scientific affairs and the need for robust ethics in the scientific community?'

'A lot of writers have been. The fear is that in subjecting the human to microbiological analysis, the individual becomes a mere atom, and atoms can be split. Science divides up the individual on the operation table, saving some of its functions, discarding others.'

We walked in comfortable silence for a few moments, as Hans took note of the names of the roads we were passing.

'Of course,' Hans said, 'Huxley wasn't the first to note the totalitarian potential of odours. As early as 1911 the German writer and philosopher Salomon Friedlander wrote a sci-fi piece about purifying the air of the whole world. It's a totalitarian project and large parts of the world get exterminated in the process.'

'Why the correlation between odour and totalitarianism, do you think?'

'Fascist politics is, among other things, politics of the body. We have the rhetoric of health, contagion, and disease of the *Volk*. The medicalisation of genocidal practices, and at the furthest end of the spectrum, the concentration and extermination camps that bear down directly on the bodies of the prisoners. The olfactory medium serves as an excellent entry point into the politics of the body.'

'So, it's because of the power of odour that totalitarianism and olfactory measures go hand in hand?'

'Sure. I mean, the body as the locus of sensory perception can be viewed as the provider of all that we can be sure about. Even Hegel,' – Hans indicated we were turning left into Ruschestrasse – 'compared the communication of pure knowledge to the dispersion of a scent in a non-resisting atmosphere. It's an all-out contagion. Therefore there is no defence against it.'

Hans stopped and looked at his street guide. 'It should be round the next block.'

'Great.'

'But of course, it was Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* that really put olfactory perception on the popular cultural map of our time.'

'The story of a murderer.'

'Yes. It's funny, people never really think of *Perfume* as being about anything other than smell. In fact it's a novel of fascination, even obsession, similar to the fascist obsession with charismatic power.'

'Do you think maybe Süskind, in his novel, sought to portray smell as the human soul?'

'Why do you say that?' Hans turned towards me and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

'Well, Grenouille has no personal odour of his own and as a result no empathy from other humans; they

don't even notice when he's in their presence. It's only when he starts adorning himself with the scents of other people that he is acknowledged by society. And the women he tracks down with his nose die when he extracts their essence for his perfume collection. And in the end, when he unstoppers a bottle containing the scent of however many young virgins he killed, amongst the multitude who have gathered to witness his execution for their murders, the crowd is overcome with awe and worship him as a religious apparition. Like some sort of Holy Ghost.'

Hans nodded encouragingly and turned his head away from me momentarily to press the button on the pedestrian crossing.

'Could be,' he said, his pointed shoes elegantly traversing the zebra crossing.

'And,' I said skipping across the road after him, 'I came across this book a while ago, by a German guy called Gustav Jaeger. It's called the *Origins of the Soul* and apparently his thesis is that odour is the soul of a being. Anyway, I wasn't going to bother following it up because it's written in nineteenth-century German. But . . .'

As I told him about an article Werner Pieper had sent me, reporting on Jaeger's great-granddaughter's objection to similarities between Süskind's novel and *Origins of the Soul*, we turned off the main road into what looked like an English council estate.

'How interesting!' he said. 'I've not heard of it. Have you read it?'

'No,' I said, following him up the marbled steps into a heavily graffitied concrete block. 'It's in German. I'm hoping a friend here will translate it for me. But I did come across a patent taken out by Jaeger. It describes the preparation by "neutral analysis" of a scent-extract from the hair of healthy women. The hair is cut into small pieces and ground, first with lactose, then with water and finally

with alcohol. It says homeopathic dilutions of the extracts are energising and animating.'

'Interesting. *Origins of the Soul* you say? I'll get a copy and look into it.'

A small statue of Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, who, Hans explained, was the founder of the Bolshevik secret police force, greeted us on entry to the museum.

Hans leaned in to the receptionist's window and smiled broadly.

I stared at a portrait of Lenin someone had spray painted over with the words 'The sleep of reason breeds monsters'. The scruffy picture looked strangely out of place in the otherwise sparse environment of this shiny black tiled room.

It didn't take long for Hans to charm one of the ladies who worked in the museum into giving us a guided tour. Unfortunately, it was in German, and as hard as I looked into the intensely green whirlpools of the snake-like eyes of the guide garbling at me, I couldn't understand a word of the everlasting grief she felt from living under the Stasi regime.

But I took in the exhibits. Cameras and listening devices hidden inside bird-houses and wooden logs, car doors, the insides of which were embedded with infra-red cameras, hung off the walls haphazardly. A whole room was dedicated to the Stasi dogs and their 'political operative work'. The dogs, the information cards explained, were used to track down anarchists and political opponents. 'Odour clues' would be sampled from political fliers, letters and pamphlets by holding a cloth on the object in question for a minimum of 30 minutes (unless the crime had been committed over 24 hours ago, in which case it should be held there for considerably longer). The sample would then be compared to second odour clues, surreptitiously obtained from absorbent pads secreted under the chair on

which the suspect was placed during a fearful interrogation ordeal. The scent jars were lined up inside a glass exhibit box along with the forensic tools of the odour clue collectors. The accurate sampling of the odours was said to require special equipment; a dust cloth to be impregnated with the scent, sterile tweezers and aluminium foil. Even in the GDR, scent evidence from a dog was not officially condoned as evidence sufficient of itself to convict a suspect, though hundreds were convicted on the basis of it. Each jar bore the name and crime of the soul within, the deodorant with which the body had been adorned, its activity within the last 24 hours, and the names of any animals with which it had been in contact. The final exhibit panel bore as its title the overriding objective of the Stasi operation: the transparent citizen.

Hans and I left the exhibit rooms and walked out into the hallway where huge black and white photographs depicted the storming of the Stasi offices in Leipzig on 9 October 1989. Seventy thousand rapturous faces, illuminated by candlelight, were calling for an end to the Stasi spy network. After several years of living in fear as a result of being spied upon, they suddenly decided that enough was enough and confronted the Stasi *en masse*. Overwhelmed at the sudden lack of fear among their subjects, the officials inside the building began shredding their files in a desperate panic lest the extent of their surveillance activities be publicly unveiled. Piles of papier maché littered the corners of the museum hallway, relics of the shredded Stasi files.



'So,' I asked Hans, when the time came to say good-bye, 'do you think I should be afraid of environmental fragrancing systems?'

'Do I think you should be afraid?' he asked in surprise.

'No. I think it's an interesting area to look at because essentially, the investigation of the olfactory is the investigation of everything else. But even the most recent physicochemical research is at a loss to explain why certain molecules of a very similar structure produce sensory impressions of a completely diverse nature. Even in *Brave New World*, in which olfaction is used as a control mechanism, olfaction is also what results in its downfall. The political manipulators of *Brave New World* control and manufacture the good part of the olfactory spectrum; the bad part, however, emerges against their will, escaping, as it does, from acts and processes of an ethically questionable nature.'

I thanked him for his time and we parted ways. Hans was going to meet friends for dinner. I was getting the train to Mannheim for the next day's 'Non Lethal' Weapons European Symposium.

As the afternoon set in and I boarded my train, it began to drizzle. The atmosphere shed its tears across the window as I sailed out of the mist towards the south-west.