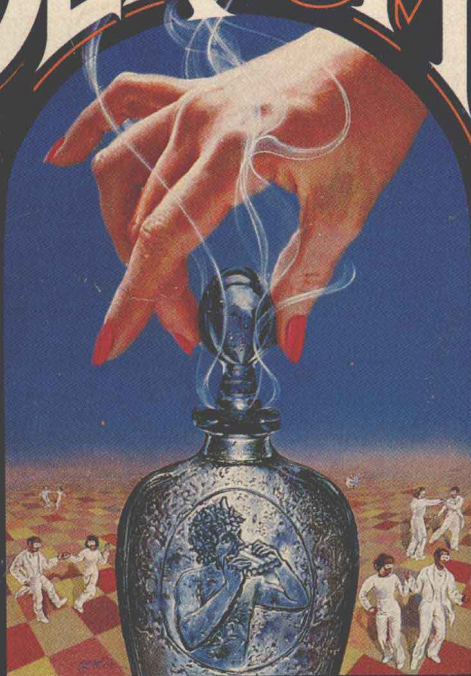


THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# JITTERBUG PERFUME



# TOM ROBBINS

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TOM  
ROBBINS



BANTAM BOOKS

TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

FOR DONNA AND THE WATER MUSIC

*for those whose letters I still  
haven't answered*

JITTERBUG PERFUME

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The author is grateful to his agent and friend, Phoebe Larmore; to his intrepid editor, Alan Rinzler; to Laren Elizabeth Stover, who passed him fragrance-industry secrets in lipsticked envelopes; and to Jessica Maxwell, whose ancestor once owned a perfume shop in New Orleans, and who traded him that shop for a flying conch shell.

*The distinctive human problem from time immemorial has been the need to spiritualize human life, to lift it onto a special immortal plane, beyond the cycles of life and death that characterize all other organisms.*

—ERNEST BECKER

*The history of civilization is the story of man's emancipation from a lot that was harsh, brutish, and short. Every step of that upward climb to a sophisticated way of life has been paralleled by a corresponding advance in the art of perfumery.*

—ERIC MAPLE

*Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

—DYLAN THOMAS

*(And) always smell as nice as possible.*

—LYNDA BARRY

## TODAY'S SPECIAL

THE BEET IS THE MOST INTENSE of vegetables. The radish, admittedly, is more feverish, but the fire of the radish is a cold fire, the fire of discontent not of passion. Tomatoes are lusty enough, yet there runs through tomatoes an undercurrent of frivolity. Beets are deadly serious.

Slavic peoples get their physical characteristics from potatoes, their smoldering inquietude from radishes, their seriousness from beets.

The beet is the melancholy vegetable, the one most willing to suffer. You can't squeeze blood out of a *turnip* . . .

The beet is the murderer returned to the scene of the crime. The beet is what happens when the cherry finishes with the carrot. The beet is the ancient ancestor of the autumn moon, bearded, buried, all but fossilized; the dark green sails of the grounded moon-boat stitched with veins of primordial plasma; the kite string that once connected the moon to the Earth now a muddy whisker drilling desperately for rubies.

The beet was Rasputin's favorite vegetable. You could see it in his eyes.

In Europe there is grown widely a large beet they call the *mangel-wurzel*. Perhaps it is *mangel-wurzel* that we see in Rasputin. Certainly there is *mangel-wurzel* in the music of Wagner, although it is another composer whose name begins, B-e-e-t—.

Of course, there are white beets, beets that ooze sugar water instead of blood, but it is the red beet with which we are concerned; the variety that blushes and swells like a hemorrhoid, a hemorrhoid for which there is no cure. (Actually, there is one remedy: commission a potter to make you a ceramic asshole—and when you aren't sitting on it, you can use it as a bowl for borscht.)

An old Ukrainian proverb warns, "A tale that begins with a beet will end with the devil."

That is a risk we have to take.

## SEATTLE

PRISCILLA LIVED IN A STUDIO APARTMENT. It was called a "studio" apartment because art is supposed to be glamorous and landlords have a vested interest in making us believe that artists prefer to sleep in their workrooms. Real artists almost never live in studio apartments. There isn't enough space, and the light is all wrong. Clerks live in studio apartments. File clerks, shop clerks, law clerks, community college students, elderly widows, and unmarried waitresses such as Priscilla.

The building in which this particular studio apartment donned its false beret was built during the Great Depression. In Seattle there are many such buildings, anointing their bricks in the rain on densely populated hillsides between Lake Washington and Elliott Bay. Architecturally, its plain facade and straight lines echoed the gown Eleanor Roosevelt wore to the inaugural ball, while its interior walls still reproduced faithfully the hues of the split pea mush dished up in hundreds of soup kitchens. Over the years, the building had been so lived in that it had acquired a life of its own. Every toilet bowl gurgled like an Italian tenor with a mouthful of Lavoris, and the refrigerators made noises at night like buffalo grazing.

Most older studio apartments—the ones in those buildings of New Deal brick—harbored odors as definitive as their colors and sounds, odors arrived at through generations of



salmon cakes frying and broccoli boiling, but here was where Priscilla's apartment differed. It smelled of chemicals—less mephitic than sweet—and it was that *smell* that leaped to greet her, like a cooped-up pooch, when she let herself in on a weary midnight.

The first thing she did after switching on the overhead light was to kick off her low-heeled waitress shoes. The second thing she did was to stub a toe on a table leg. The table, at which innumerable widows had sat down to canasta, shuddered paroxysmally, causing beakers of chemicals to rattle and sway. Fortunately, merely a few drops of their contents were lost.

Priscilla flopped on the couch that was also her bed and massaged her feet, devoting special attention to the affronted toe. "Goddamnit," she said. "I'm such a klutz. I don't deserve to live in this world. I ought to be sent to one of those planets where there isn't any gravity."

Earlier that evening, at the restaurant, she'd dropped a whole tray of cocktails.

Inside her hose, her feet were as red as newborn mice. Steam seemed to rise from them. Mouse gas. She rubbed her feet until they felt comforted, then she rubbed her eyes. With a sleepy sigh, she let herself topple over on the couch, only to be startled by a shower of silver coins. The evening's tips had cascaded from her pockets and scattered about her head and body, the couch and floor. She watched a dime roll across the worn carpet as if heading for the exit. "Is this what they mean by runaway inflation?" she asked. "Come back here, you coward!"

Sighing again, she arose and gathered the money. The few crumpled bills she stuffed in her purse, the coins she trickled into a dusty fishbowl on the dresser. The bowl was full to overflowing. "Tomorrow I'll open a bank account," she vowed. She had made that vow before.

She removed her uniform—a blue sailor dress with piping of white and red—and tossed it in a corner. At the bathroom sink in her panty hose and bra, she washed her hair. She felt too tired to wash her hair, but it so reeked of cook grease and cigarette smoke that it competed with the resident smell of the apartment, and that would never do. There was no cap

for the shampoo bottle. In fact, she couldn't remember when it—or the toothpaste—had last had a cap. "I could have sworn there was a cap on it when I bought it," she said.

A number of short, curly hairs were stuck to the cake of soap. They made her wince. The hairs reminded her of an incident at work. She and Ricki usually took their breaks together. They would lock themselves in the employees' wash-room and smoke a joint or blow a line of coke. Anything to lighten the load of the trays. Inevitably, Ricki made lewd suggestions. Sometimes, she'd casually lay her hands on Priscilla's body. Priscilla was not really offended. Ricki was one of the few people on the restaurant staff who could read something more intellectually demanding than a menu. Moreover, she was pretty, in a dank, faintly mustachioed way. Perhaps Priscilla was obliquely titillated by Ricki's advances. Usually, she brushed them off in a manner that made them both laugh. On this night, however, when, on the pretext of leveling a molehill that allegedly had bunched up in Priscilla's panty hose, Ricki administered to the back of her upper thigh with lengthy and ever-widening caresses, Priscilla had snapped at her and punched her hard on the arm. At the end of the shift, Priscilla apologized. "I'm just tired," she told Ricki. "I'm truly goddamned exhausted." Ricki said that it was okay, but said it in a tone that intimated damage below the waterline of their friendship. Priscilla brooded over this as she plucked several pubes from the soap.

The secondary function of a bathroom mirror is to measure murmurs in mental mud. Priscilla glanced at her "seismograph" and disliked the reading. She was as pallid as a Q-tip and as ready to unravel. Dropping the soap in the sink, she imposed a smile on her reflection. With a sudsy finger she pushed at the triangular tip of her crisp little corn chip of a nose. She winked each eye. Her eyes were equally enormous, equally violet, but the left eye winked smoothly while the right required effort and a scrunching of flesh. She tugged at her wet autumn-colored hair as if she were stopping a trolley. "You're still cute as a button," she told herself. "Of course, I've never seen a cute button, but who am I to argue with the wisdom of the ages?" She puckered her bubble gum mouth until its exaggerated sensuality drew attention away

from the blood-blue crescents beneath her eyes. "My bags may be packed, but I haven't left town. No wonder Ricki finds me irresistible. She's only human."

Leaning her forehead against the scummy rim of the sink, Priscilla suddenly wept. She continued weeping until the heat of her tear water, the sheer velocity of its flow, finally obscured the already vague circumstances of its origins. Then, as memory after memory relinquished its sharp focus, and even fatigue and loneliness proved water soluble, she shut her tear ducts with an almost audible resolve. She blew her nose on a washcloth (she had been out of toilet tissue for a week), tossed her clammy hair, pulled on a lab coat over her underwear, and stepped into the living room cum bedroom cum laboratory where, over an assortment of burners, beakers, and bubbling glass tubing, she would toil with uncharacteristic fastidiousness until dawn.

In the life of Priscilla, the genius waitress, this night was fairly routine. It differed significantly from every other night of her year in but one respect: at what she reckoned to be about five in the morning—her clock had run down and she hadn't gotten around to winding it—there was a soft rapping at her door. Since her neighborhood, Capitol Hill, was a high-crime district and since she had no wish to be interrupted by Ricki or some man she'd once slept with out of need and then forgotten, she'd chosen not to answer. At sunup, however, just prior to retiring for her customary and inadequate six hours of rest, she cracked the door to see whether her caller had left a note. She was puzzled to find on her doorsill a solitary lump of something, which, after cautious examination, she identified as a beet.

## NEW ORLEANS

"WHAT IS THE HOUR, V'LU?"

"Dee *whut*?"

"The hour. What is the hour?"

"Why, ma'am, dee hour is whut is on dee clock. 'Tween dee numbers."

"V'lu!" said Madame Devalier. When Madame Devalier raised her voice, it was like Diamond Jim raising a poker pot. Even the termites in the foundation paid attention. "What time is it?"

"It three o'clock, ma'am."

Madame Devalier clasped the overbite of her bosom in disbelief. "Three o'clock in the morning!"

"Three o'clock in dee night, ma'am. You knows dat in New Orleans it not morning 'til dee sun come up." V'lu laughed. Her laughter resembled the tinkle of a toy xylophone. "Sometime, when dee hurricane drops be passing 'round, it not git morning all day."

"You are correct, as usual, chérie. But let us not be speaking of hurricane drops. Nothing goes out of this shop but perfume. And what perfume! Three o'clock in the morn—in the night! This boof has made me so dizzy I have lost all sense of time." She peeked into a vat of percolating petals. Inside the vat the scene resembled an Esther Williams water ballet filmed in the lagoons of hell. "This is the strongest

jasmine I have ever smelled. It makes my head spin, V'lu. We must buy from that Jamaican again."

The Hershey-skinned maid nodded. "Dat island nigger dee talk of dee Quarter, ma'am. He be selling flowers, he be singing songs, and all de time dose honey bees buzzing 'round he head. . . ."

"That is most unusual," Madame Devalier agreed. "Sometimes they circle him like a halo, and other times it's as if they form *horns*. He wears those bees like a crown, a living crown."

"You think he wear dem bees to bed at night?"

Madame Devalier wagged a finger at the young woman. The finger was plump, wrinkled, ringed, and tipped with a crimson nail. "If you know what's good for you, you won't be concerning your pretty self with his habits in bed. Now fetch me some more alcohol, cher. We must dilute this boof before it starts a chain reaction and blows New Orleans into the Gulf. We have a jasmine Nagasaki cooking here!"

Indeed, a solitary wino weaving down Royal Street was aroused into momentary sobriety by the olfactory force of the aroma that seeped through the closed shutters of the small shop. The man, a longtime resident of the area, stared at the faded sign—Parfumerie Devalier—and crossed himself before continuing on his way.

For forty years, Madame Lily Devalier had kept the shop. Her father had kept it for fifty years before her. In its day, allegedly, some odd business had passed through its arched doorway. Moon medicine and jazz powders. Lucky root and come-together potent. Mojo cream and loa lotion. Hurricane drops, kill-me-not juice, coonass courting pomade and a special "oil of midnight" that had nothing to do with overtime at the office. Among fashionable folk in the French Quarter, Madame D. was known as the Queen of the Good Smells. There was a time when certain people in the Quarter pronounced it "Spells." Nowadays, however, with much of the Quarter gone to seed—the shop along with it—Madame was trying to reattract some of the clientele she had lost to the large international fragrance houses, so she dealt in perfume and nothing but perfume. Or so she claimed.

Under her mistress's watchful eye, V'lu poured molasses-

distilled alcohol into a crock. The crock had been collecting the essential oil as it dripped through a filter tube attached to the steeping vat. The Jamaican jasmine was so pungent, however, that the diluting agent barely dulled its edge.

"Ooh-la-la!" exclaimed Madame Devalier. She plopped down her pumpkin patch, her Spanish ballroom, her pagan idol of a body on a lime velvet love seat. "This boof may cause me to faint."

"Ah gitting a sinful headache," V'lu complained.

Out on Royal, following in the footsteps of the departed wino, a tall, lean black man in a greenish yellow skullcap paused before the shutters of the Parfumerie Devalier. He sniffed the air like a stag. He sniffed again. He clapped his hands in delight and cackled aloud. And shifting a bit on his head, emitting a sleepy whisper, his skullcap stirred its many little wings.

Since there were no witnesses, it is impossible to say whether that man was responsible for the single garden-variety beet that V'lu discovered on her cot—tossed in through the open second-story window, perhaps—when she went to lay herself down that night (and thanks to some medication strongly resembling hurricane drops with which her employer had treated her headache, it *was* still night, wasn't it, V'lu?).

## PARIS

IN THE CENTER OF A MARBLE-TOP DESK, DIRECTLY under a crystal chandelier, sitting alone on a silver tray, was a large, raw beet. The beet must have been out of the ground a week or more, for it had the ashen exterior of a cancer victim. Yet, when struck at a particular angle by a flicker of candlelight from the chandelier, its heart of wine-drenched velvet shone through.

The desk was in an office, the office in a skyscraper. The skyscraper was like any other, a slender tower of steel and glass, totally without embellishment or dash. Even its height—a mere twenty-three stories—was unremarkable. Its lone distinguishing feature was the neighborhood from whose midst it rose. Across the street from its entrance was a monastery and a cathedral, the limestone steps of which had been worn as radiant as blue serge trousers by centuries of pious comings and goings. To the right of the building was a block of bicycle shops and cafés; to the left a slate-roofed hotel where, a few decades past, artists *had* slept and worked within the same four walls, never dreaming that their miserable circumstances might be romanticized in the “studio apartment” market of the future. Above the building, the sky recalled passages from *Les Misérables*, threadbare and gray. Below it (everything sits on something else), were the ruins of a brewery that once had been operated by monks from across the street. In the 1200s, Crusaders returning from Palestine in-

troduced perfume to France, and after it achieved popularity there, the monks had made perfume as well as beer. Vestiges of the ancient perfumery could be explored in the basement of the skyscraper. In fact, the LeFever family, which built the skyscraper, had purchased the perfume business from the monastery in the seventeenth century and was still in the trade.

On this day, already described as meteorologically evocative of Victor Hugo at his most dire, Claude LeFever had barged into the office of Marcel LeFever unannounced. Why not? They were blood relatives and both vice-presidents of the firm. Surely, formalities were unnecessary. Yet Marcel seemed annoyed. Perhaps it was because he was wearing his whale mask.

Claude put his hands on his hips and stared at his cousin. "Thar she blows!" he yelled.

"Kiss my ass," said Marcel, from inside the mask.

"Forgive me but I would not quite know where to look for the ass of a fish."

"A whale is not a fish, you fool."

"Oh, yes."

(Claude and Marcel LeFever were speaking in French. This simultaneous English translation is being beamed to the reader via literary satellite.)

Holding degrees in both accounting and law, Claude made the financial decisions for the LeFever family. Marcel, who had grown up in the perfume labs, learning to think with his nose, was in charge of "creativity," a term that Claude did not completely comprehend, but which, to his credit, he recognized to be essential. If creativity was enhanced by pacing the executive suites in a papier-mâché mask, it was all right with Claude, no matter how it frightened the secretaries. It was Marcel's habit of making large cash donations to ecology commandos intent upon sabotaging the whaling industry that bothered the frugal Claude. Claude was well aware of the previous importance to the perfume industry of ambergris, a substance secreted by temporarily infirm whales, but he was convinced that petrochemical and coal tar fixatives were completely adequate substitutes. "Fish puke is a thing of the past," he'd tell Marcel.



"A whale is a mammal, you idiot."

"Oh, yes."

In Marcel's office, as in Claude's next door, there was a floor-to-ceiling window from which one could look down on the cathedral spire. "We are closer to heaven than the monks," Claude was fond of saying. On this day, however, the sky, layered with thin altostratus clouds and smog, appeared to reflect human suffering and failed to awaken in Claude visions of paradise. It did, in its grim emaciation, remind him that he had skipped breakfast in order to be punctual at a board meeting that Marcel, it was probably just as well, had not attended. "Why don't you take that stupid thing off and let's go to lunch," Claude suggested.

Through the eyeholes of the mask, Marcel continued to stare out the window. "Something rather interesting arrived in the morning mail," he said.

"What was that?"

"What else but a beet?" Marcel shifted his gaze from the window to the centerpiece of his desk.

"Oh, yes. I wasn't going to mention the beet. In my years as your cousin and business associate, I have learned that it is frequently best to let sleeping dogs lie. Now that you've broached the subject, I must admit there is a beet on your desk, rather prominently displayed. Arrived in the mail, you say?"

Without a trace of self-consciousness, Marcel lifted off the mask and placed it on the floor beside his chair, revealing an imposing Gallic nose, a gray-streaked spade of a beard, wet brown eyes, and black hair slicked back to resemble patent leather. Were it not that Claude's eyes were less moody, his hair more lightly greased, the cousins were identical, even to the cut of their pin-striped suits. Business competitors often referred to them as the LeFever twins.

"It hadn't actually been posted, if that's what you mean. Nor was it wrapped. It arrived in its corporeal envelope, which is to say, its own body of beet flesh. It was merely sitting atop the basket of morning mail when I came in."

"A token from an admirer. Some woman—or man—in the building. A beet is not entirely devoid of phallic connotations."

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