Roald Dahl - Switch Bitch (1975)

Excerpt from the fourth story, entitled 'Bitch'

Paris
Wednesday.

Breakfast at ten. I tried the new honey. It was delivered yesterday in an early Sèvres sucrier which had that lovely canary-coloured ground known as *jonquille*. "From Suzie," the note said, "and thank you." It is nice to be appreciated. And the honey was interesting. Suzie Jolibois had, among other things, a small farm south from Casablanca, and was fond of bees. Her hives were set in the midst of a plantation of *cannabis indica*, and the bees drew their nectar exclusively from this source. They lived, those bees, in a state of perpetual euphoria and were disinclined to work. The honey was therefore very scarce. I spread a third piece of toast. The stuff was almost black. It had a pungent aroma. The telephone rang. I put the receiver to my ear and waited. I never speak first when called. After all, I'm not phoning them. They're phoning me.

"Oswald! Are you there?"

I knew the voice. "Yes, Henri," I said. "Good morning."

"Listen!" he said, speaking fast and sounding excited. "I think I've got it! I'm almost certain I've got it! Forgive me if I'm out of breath, but I've just had a rather fantastic experience. It's all right now. Everything is fine. Will you come over?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll come over." I replaced the receiver and poured myself another cup of coffee. Had Henry really done it at last? If he had, then I wanted to be around to share the fun.

I must pause here to tell you how I met Henry Biotte. Some three years ago I drove down to Provence to spend the summer weekend with a lady who was interesting to me simply because she possessed an extraordinarily powerful muscle in a region where other women have no muscles at all. An hour after my arrival, I was strolling alone on the lawn beside the river when a small dark man approached me. He had black hairs on the backs of his hands and he made a little bow and said, "Henri Biotte, a fellow guest."

"Oswald Cornelius," I said.

Henri Biotte was as hairy as a goat. His chin and cheeks were covered with bristly black hair and thick tufts of it were sprouting from his nostrils. "May I join you?" he said, falling into step beside me and starting immediately to talk. And what a talker he was! How Gallic, how

excitable. He walked with a mad little hop, and his fingers flew as if he wanted to scatter them to the four winds of heaven, and his words went off like firecrackers, with terrific speed. He was a Belgian chemist, he said, working in Paris. He was an olfactory chemist. He had devoted his life to the study of olfaction.

"You mean smell?" I said.

"Yes, yes!" he cried. "Exactly! I am an expert on smells. I know more about smells than anyone else in the world!"

"Good smells or bad?" I asked, trying to slow him down.

"Good smells, lovely smells, glorious smells!" he said. "I make them! I can make any smell you want!"

He went on to tell me he was the chief perfume blender to one of the great couturiers in the city. And his nose, he said, placing a hairy finger on the tip of his hairy proboscis, probably looked just like any other nose, did it not? I wanted to tell him it had more hairs sprouting from the noseholes than wheat from the prairies and why he didn't get his barber to snip them out, but instead I confessed politely that I could see nothing unusual about it.

"Quite so," he said. "But in actual fact it is a smelling organ of phenomenal sensitivity. With two sniffs it can detect the presence of a single drop of macrocyclic musk in a gallon of geranium oil."

"Extraordinary," I said.

"On the Champs-Elysées," he went on, "which is a wide thoroughfare, my nose can identify the precise perfume being used by a woman walking on the other side of the street."

"With the traffic in between?"

"With heavy traffic in between," he said.

He went on to name two of the most famous perfumes in the world, both of them made by the fashion house he worked for. "Those are my personal creations," he said modestly. "I blended them myself. They have made a fortune for the celebrated old bitch who runs the business."

"But not for you?"

"Me! I am but a poor miserable employee on a salary," he said, spreading his palms and hunching his shoulders so high they touched his earlobes.

"One day though, I shall break away and pursue my dream."

"You have a dream?"

"I have a glorious, tremendous, exciting dream, my dear sir!"

"Then why don't you pursue it?"

"Because first I must find a man farsighted enough and wealthy enough to back me."

Ah-ha, I thought, so that's what it's all about. "With a reputation like yours, that shouldn't be too difficult," I said.

"The sort of rich man I seek is hard to find," he said. "He must be a sporty gambler with a very keen appetite for the bizarre."

That's me, you clever little bugger, I thought. "What is this dream you wish to pursue?" I asked him. "Is it making perfumes?"

"My dear fellow!" he cried. "Anyone can make *perfumes*! I'm talking about *the* perfume! The *only* one that counts!"

"Which would that be?"

"Why, the *dangerous* one, of course! And when I have made it, I shall rule the world!"

"Good for you," I said.

"I am not joking, Monsieur Cornelius. Would you permit me to explain what I am driving at?"

"Go ahead."

"Forgive me if I sit down," he said, moving toward a bench. "I had a heart-attack last April and I have to be careful."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Oh, don't be sorry. All will be well so long as I don't overdo things."

It was a lovely afternoon and the bench was on the lawn near the riverbank and we sat down on it. Beside us, the river flowed slow and smooth and deep, and there were little clouds of waterflies hovering over the surface. Across the river there were willows along the bank and beyond the willows and emerald-green meadow, yellow with buttercups, and a single cow grazing. The cow was brown and white.

"I tell you what kind of perfume I wish to make," he said. "But it is essential I explain a few other things to you on the way or you will not fully understand. So please bear with me a while." One hand lay limp upon his lap, the hairy part upward. It looked like a black rat. He was stroking it gently with the fingers of the other hand.

"Let us consider first," he said, "the phenomenon that occurs when a dog meets a bitch in heat. The dog's sexual drive is tremendous. All self-control disappears. He has only one thought in his head, which is to fornicate on the spot, and unless he is prevented by force, he will do so. But you know what it is that causes this tremendous sex-drive in a dog?"

"Smell," I said.

"Precisely, Monsieur Cornelius. Odorous molecules of a special conformation enter the dog's nostrils and stimulate his olfactory nerve-endings. This causes urgent signals to be sent to the olfactory bulb and thence to the higher brain centers. It is *all* done by smell. If you sever a dog's olfactory nerve, he will lose interest in sex. This is also true of many other mammals, but it is not true of man. Smell has nothing to do with the sexual appetite of the human male. He is stimulated in this respect by sight, by tactility, and by his lively imagination. Never by smell."

"What about perfume?" I said.

"It's all rubbish!" he answered. "All thos expensive scents in small bottles, the ones I make, they have no aphrodisiac effect at all upon a man. Perfume was never intended for that purpose. In the old days, women used it to conceal the fact that they stank. Today, when they no longer stink, they use it purely for narcissistic reasons. They enjoy putting it on and smelling their own good smells. Men hardly notice the stuff. I promise you that."

"I do," I said.

"Does it stir you physically?"

"No, not physically. Aesthetically, yes."

"You enjoy the smell. So do I. But there are plenty of other smells I enjoy more – the bouquet of a good Lafite, the scent of a fresh Comice

pear, or the smell of the air blowing in from the sea on the Britanny coast."

A trout jumped high in midstream and the sunlight flashed on its body. "You must forget," said Monsieur Biotte, "all the nonsense about musk and ambergris and the testicular secretions of the civet cat. We make our perfumes from chemicals these days. If I want a musky odour I use ethylene sebacate. Penylacetic acid will give me civet and benzaldehyde will provide the smell of almonds. No sir, I am no longer interested in mixing up chemicals to make pretty smells."

For some minutes his nose had been running slightly, wetting the black hairs in his nostrils. He noticed it and produced a handkerchief and gave it a blow and a wipe. "What I intend to do," he said, "is to produce a perfume which will have the same electrifying effect upon a man as the scent of a bitch in heat has upon a dog! One whiff and that'll be it! The man will lose all control. He'll rip off his pants and ravish the lady on the spot!"

"We could have some fun with that," I said.

"We could rule the world!" he cried.

"Yes, but you told me just now that smell has nothing to do with the sexual appetite of the human male."

"It doesn't," he said. "But it used to. I have evidence that in the period of the post-glacial drift, when primitive man was far more closely related to the ape that he is now, he still retained the ape-like characteristic of jumping on any right-smelling female he ran across. And later, in the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods, he continued to become sexually animated by smell, but to a lesser and lesser degree. By the time the higher civilisations had come along in Egypt and China around 2000 B.C., evolution had played its part and had completely suppressed man's ability to be stimulated sexually by smell. Am I boring you?"

"Not at all. But tell me, does that mean an actual physical change had taken place in man's smelling apparatus?"

"Absolutely not," he said. "Otherwise there'd be nothing we could do about it. The little mechanism that enabled our ancestors to smell these subtle odours is still there. I happen to know it is. Listen, you've seen how some people can make their ears move a tiny bit?"

"I can do it myself," I said, doing it.

"You see," he said, "the ear-moving muscle is still there. It's a leftover from the time when man used to be able to cock his ears forward for better hearing, like a dog. He lost that ability over a hundred thousand years ago, but the muscle remains. And the same applies to our smelling apparatus. The mechanism for smelling those secret smells is still there, but we have lost the ability to use it."

"How can you be so certain it's still there?" I asked.

"Do you know how our smelling system works?" he said.

"Not really."

"Then I shall tell you, otherwise I cannot answer your question. Attend closely, please. Air is sucked in through the nostrils and passes the three blaffle-shaped turbinate bones in the upper part of the nose. There it gets warmed and filtered. This warm air now travels up and over two clefts that contain the smelling organs. These organs are patches of

yellowish tissue, each about an inch square. In this tissue are embedded the nerve-fibres and nerve-endings of the olfactory nerve. Every nerve-ending consists of an olfactory cell bearing a cluster of tiny hair-like filaments. These filaments act as receivers. 'Receptors' is a better word. And when the receptors are tickled or stimulated by odorous molecules, they send signals to the brain. If, as you come downstairs in the morning, you sniff into your nostrils the odorous moleculs of frying bacon, these will stimulate your receptors, the receptors will flash a signal along the olfactory nerve to the brain, and the brain will interpret it in terms of the character and intensity of the odour. And that is when you cry out, "Ah-ha, bacon for breakfast!"

"I never eat bacon for breakfast," I said.

He ignored this.

"These receptors," he went on, "these tiny hair-like filaments are what concern us. And now you are going to ask me how on earth they can tell the difference between one odorous molecule and another, between, say, peppermint and camphor?"

"How can they?" I said. I was interested in this.

"Attend more closely than ever now, please," he said. "At the end of each receptor is an indentation, a sort of cup, except that it isn't round. This is the 'receptor site'. Imagine now thousands of these little hair-like filaments with tiny cupsat their extremities, all waving about like the tendrils of sea anemones and waiting to catch in their cups any odorous molecules that pass by. That, you see, is what actually happens. When you sniff a certain smell, the odorous molecules of the substance which made go rushing around inside your nostrils and get caught by the little cups, the receptor sites. Molecules come in all shapes and sizes, and the little cups or receptor sites are also differently shaped. Thus, the molecules lodge only in the receptor sites which fit them. Pepperminty molecules go only into special pepperminty receptor sites. Camphor molecules, which have a quite different shape, will fit only into the special camphor receptor sites, and so on. It's rather like those toys for small children where they have to fit variously shaped pieces into the right holes."

"Let me see if I understand you," I said. "Are you saying that my brain will know it is a pepperminty smell simply because the molecule has lodged in a pepperminty receptor site?"

"*Precisely*."

"But you are surely not suggesting there are differently shaped receptor sites for every smell in the world?"

"No," he said. "As a matter of fact, man has only seven differently shaped sites."

"Why only seven?"

"Because our sense of smell recognises only seven 'pure primary odours.' All the rest are 'complex odours' made up by mixing the primaries."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Positive. Our sense of taste has even less. It recognises only four primaries – sweet, sour, salt, and bitter!" All other tastes are mixtures of these."

"What are the seven pure primary odours?" I asked him.

"Their names are of no importance to us," he said. "Why confuse the issue?"

"I'd like to hear them."

"All right," he said. "They are camphoraceous, pungent, musky, ethereal, floral, peppermint, and putrid. Don't look so skeptical, please. This isn't *my* discovery. Very learned scientists have worked on it for years. And their conclusions are quite accurate, *except in one respect*."

"What's that?"

"*There is an eighth pure primary odour which they don't know about, and an eighth receptor site to receive the curiously shaped molecules of that odour!*"

"Ah-haha!" I said. "I see what you're driving at."

"Yes," he said, "the eighth pure primary odour is the sexual stimulant that caused primitive man to behave like a dog thousands of years ago. It has a very peculiar molecular structure."

"Then you know what it is?"

"Of course I know what it is."

"And you say we still retain the receptor sites for these peculiar molecules to fit into?"

"Absolutely."

"This mysterious smell," I said, "does it ever reach our own nostrils nowadays?"

"Frequently."

"Do we smell it? I mean, are we aware of it?"

"No."

"You mean the molecules don't get caught in the receptor sites?"

"They do, my dear fellow, they do. But nothing happens. No signal is sent off to the brain. The telephone line is out of action. It's like the that ear muscle. The mechanism is still there, but we've lost the ability to use it properly."

"And what do you propose to do about that?" I asked.

"I shall reactivate it," he said. "We are dealing with nerves here, not muscles. And these nerves are not dead or injured, they're merely dormant. I shall probably increase the intensity of the smell a thousandfold and add a catalyst."

"Go on," I said.

"That's enough."

"I should like to hear more," I said.

"Forgive me for saying so, Monsieur Cornelius, but I don't think you know enough about organoleptic quality to follow me any further. The lecture is over."

Henri Biotte sat smug and quiet on the bench beside the river stroking the back of one hand with the fingers of the other. The tufts of hair sprouting from his nostrils gave him a pixie look, but that was camouflage. He struck me rather as a dangerous and dainty little creature, someone who lurked behind stones with a sharp eye and a sting in his tail, waiting for the lone traveller to come by. Surreptitiously I searched his face. The mouth interested me. The lips had a magenta tinge, possibly something to do with his heart trouble. The lower lip was caruncular and pendulous. It bungled out in the middle like a purse, and could easily have served as a receptacle for small coins. The skin of the

lip seemed to be blown up very tight, as though by air, and it was constantly wet, not from licking but from an excess of saliva in the mouth.

And there he sat, this Monsieur Henri Biotte, smiling a wicked little smile and waiting patiently for me to react. He was a totally unmoral man, that much was clear, but then so was I. He was also a wicked man, and although I cannot in all honesty claim wickedness as one of my own virtues, I find it irresistible in others. A wicked man has a lustre all his own. Then again, there was something diabolically splendid about a person who wished to set back the sex habits of civilised man half a million years.

Yes, he had me hooked. So there and then, sitting beside the river in the garden of the lady from Provence, I made an offer to Henri. I suggested he should leave his present employment forthwith and set himself up in a small laboratory. I would pay all the bills for this little venture as well as making good his salary. It would be a five-year contract, and we would go fifty-fifty on anything that came out of it.

Henri was ecstatic. "You mean it?" he cried. "You are serious?"

I held out my hand. He grasped it in both of his and shook it vigorously. It was like shaking hands with a yak. "We shall control mankind!" he said. "We'll be the gods of the earth! He flung his arms around me and embraced me and kissed me first on one cheek, then on the other. Oh, this awful Gallic kissing. Henri's lower lip felt like the wet underbelly of a toad against my skin. "Let's keep the celebrations until later," I said, wiping myself dry with a linen handkerchief.

Henri Biotte made apologies and excuses to his hostess and rushed back to Paris that night. Within a week he had given up his old job and had rented three rooms to serve as a laboratory. These were on the third floor of a house on the Left Bank, on the Rue de Cassette, just off the Boulevard Raspaille. He spent a great deal of my money equipping the place with complicated apparatus, and he even installed a large cage into which he put two apes, a male and a female. He also took on an assistant, a clever and moderately presentable young lady called Jeanette. And with all that, he set to work.

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Transcript by Marcello Aspria

