The Perfumer of Glasshouse Row

Four Stories from Brindlewick - an original scent-magic story cycle by A. R. Calloway

Free sample - the opening of Story One, 'The Greenhouse at Four O'Clock'.

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The Greenhouse at Four O'Clock

Glasshouse Row runs along the lane behind Mrs. Solace's garden wall, and it is exactly what it sounds like: six shops built mostly of glass, put up in the hungry years by people who had noticed that things grew earlier on that side of the wall than anywhere else in Brindlewick. The town calls it the Row's microclimate, and lets it go at that. The town is very good at letting things go at that, provided somebody it trusts is standing nearby looking unconcerned.

At No. 4, under a green-gold sign that reads THE STILL ROOM, Hetty Crane kept other people's moments.

She was a perfumer. She made scents the way other trades make furniture - to order, to last, to be lived with - but no scent that left her shop in its blue bottle was merely a smell. A true accord, made her way, kept a moment: not a picture of it, not a story about it, but the moment itself, as it had been felt, sealed in glass with wax and string. Breathe it in, and for as long as the breath lasted you were not remembering the afternoon your daughter was born, or the morning of the armistice, or the last dance. You were in it, with the feeling still wet on it.

There were rules. There are always rules; a craft without rules is just weather.

A scent could only keep a moment its owner had truly felt. It could not keep a wish, or a version, or a lie - a false moment turned in the making, went to hot iron and scorched sugar on the nose, and Hetty had poured more than one down the sink while a customer watched, lying to her with their whole chest.

A kept moment, once opened, was spent the way money is spent: in sips, if you were careful, and it lasted; in one upending, if you were not, and it was gone by morning.

And keeping cost the keeper. That was the rule nobody liked, including Hetty. To anchor a stranger's moment in glass, she had to give the accord a weight of her own to balance it - one of her own memories, of like size, traded away into the making. She kept a ledger for it, a plain brown book she called her scent ledger, and before she traded a memory she wrote it down in her small exact hand, every smell of it, in order. The words kept a little of a thing. She had learned to live on the little.

Mira Solace came down the Row that April morning with a basket of roses on her arm and the particular expression of a woman delivering evidence.

"Gran's cut you the early ones," she said, setting the basket on the counter, among the bottles. "She says you'll know what they're for. She also says to tell anyone who asks that she grows them in the glasshouse." She looked around the Still Room - at its glass roof, its green shade, its shelves of blue bottles standing in the steam of the copper still - with the air of a woman appreciating a joke from the inside. "Which is true."

"Which is true," Hetty agreed, "and has been true for sixty years, and is the best kind of true there is: the kind that stops questions." She lifted a rose out of the basket. It was warm. Roses from behind that wall were always warm, the way bread is warm, and they smelled of more than roses - they smelled of the hour they had been grown in, and the garden grew its roses in hours it had no business having. In February the whole Row had smelled of June for a week, and Hetty had said "the microclimate" eleven times a day and sold a great deal of soap. "Your grandmother's a considerate woman, Mira. She sends me her garden's spare time, and I send the town reasons not to wonder about it. It's a fair trade. Leave

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the basket. Mind the cat."

Verdigris, the shop cat, the colour of old brass and twice as pleased with herself, was asleep in the rose basket before Mira had reached the door.

The baker's assistant came in at ten with his cap wrung to a rope in his hands, wanting his daughter's first morning bottled for her christening. He told it beautifully. He told it the way it ought to have happened - the dawn coming up gold, his wife serene as a madonna, himself steady as a rock - and Kit, watching from the still with a polishing cloth stopped in his hand, saw the accord in Hetty's catching bottle shiver like a pond under a thrown stone, and then, to the boy's visible astonishment, settle and hold.

"How?" Kit said, when the young man had gone out into Bridge Street walking on air, with the bottle wrapped like a jewel. "He was lying through his teeth. His hands were shaking too hard to hold the baby, he told me so himself while you were fetching the wax. The whole street knows his wife swore like a ferryman."

"Details can wander," said Hetty, writing the label. "Feelings can't. Underneath all that varnish, the thing he felt was true as a bell: terror, and love, and being entirely out of his depth in the best cause there is. The accord keeps the feeling, Kit, not the furniture. A moment turns on me when the feeling's false - when a body's telling me what they wish they'd felt, or what they think a person ought to feel. That's the smell you learn first in this trade: hot iron, and scorched sugar, and a customer lying to themselves with their whole chest."

- End of the free sample. The rest of Story One, plus The Scent That Turned, The Shelf of Small Hours and October, Unsealed, arrive with the launch edition of The Perfumer of Glasshouse Row (EPUB + PDF) at pagelyra.vercel.app -

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