

This is an extract from the opening of “Perfume – The story of a murderer” By Patrick Suskind. Grenouille grown up to be one of Paris’ most dangerous murderers as he tries to create the perfect perfume.

Here, then, on the most putrid spot in the whole kingdom, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille was born on July 17, 1738. It was one of the hottest days of the year. The heat lay leaden upon the graveyard, squeezing its putrefying vapour, a blend of rotting melon and the fetid odour of burnt animal horn, out into the nearby alleys. When the labour pains began, Grenouille’s mother was standing at a fish stall in the rue aux Fers, scaling whiting that she had just gutted. The fish, ostensibly taken that very morning from the Seine, already stank so vilely that the smell masked the odour of corpses. Grenouille’s mother, however, perceived the odour neither of the fish nor of the corpses, for her sense of smell had been utterly dulled, besides which her belly hurt, and the pain deadened all susceptibility to sensate impressions. She only wanted the pain to stop, she wanted to put this revolting birth behind her as quickly as possible. It was her fifth. She had effected all the others here at the fish booth, and all had been stillbirths or semi-stillbirths, for the bloody meat that had emerged had not differed greatly from the fish guts that lay there already, nor had lived much longer, and by evening the whole mess had been shovelled away and carted off to the graveyard or down to the river. It would be much the same this day, and Grenouille’s mother, who was still a young woman, barely in her mid-twenties, and who still was quite pretty and had almost all her teeth in her mouth and some hair on her head and-except for gout and syphilis and a touch of consumption-suffered from no serious disease, who still hoped to live a while yet, perhaps a good five or ten years, and perhaps even to marry one day and as the honorable wife of a widower with a trade or some such to bear real children... Grenouille’s mother wished that it were already over. And when the final contractions began, she squatted down under the gutting table and there gave birth, as she had done four times before, and cut the newborn thing’s umbilical cord with her butcher knife. But then, on account of the heat and the stench, which she did not perceive as such but only as an unbearable, numbing something-like a field of lilies or a small room filled with too many daffodils-she grew faint, toppled to one side, fell out from under the table into the street, and lay there, knife in hand.

Tumult and turmoil. The crowd stands in a circle around her, staring, someone hails the police. The woman with the knife in her hand is still lying in the street. Slowly she comes to.

What has happened to her? “Nothing.” 35

What is she doing with that knife?

“Nothing.”

Where does the blood on her skirt come from?

“From the fish.”

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She stands up, tosses the knife aside, and walks off to wash.

And then, unexpectedly, the infant under the gutting table begins to squall.

They have a look, and beneath a swarm of flies and amid the offal and fish heads they discover the newborn child. They pull it out. As prescribed by law,

they give it to a wet nurse and arrest the mother. And since she confesses, openly admitting that she would definitely have let the thing perish, just as she had with those other four by the way, she is tried, found guilty of multiple infanticide, and a few weeks later decapitated at the place de Greve.

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