

Tracey Withers  
ON THE PULSE

# AN AIR OF MYSTERY



**E**VERY so often, and not quite often enough, I see an old friend from high school. We meet at one of those secret wine bars where atmos glows from candlelit walls. We drink rich Italian red, sink opulently named cocktails. Invariably, my friend leans in and whispers: "So, what are you wearing?" Cindy's a true fragrance-phile. Psychologist by trade, perfumista at heart, her finely calibrated nose can pick a commercial bestseller at 50 paces. She'll clock Prada's latest, Chanel's famed and archival immediately. I get a special kick out of stumping her.

For me, wearing an instantly recognisable fragrance is a bit like buying a frock in a Paris back-rue only to come home and see the same print in Sportsgirl. I love Dior's J'Adore and Thierry Mugler's Angel because they are truly gorgeous—but nothing takes the shine off an icon like "I have that too" or "My sister-in-law— you know, the horse-face bitchy one— wears that." Ever smelled just like his ex-girlfriend? Eau de awkward.

My pulse points throb wildly for the niche unknown, the bottle that does not scream super-branding, the juice distilled by a rockstar perfumer most people have never heard of.

Now that perfume contracts seem to come free with record deals, I'm about not-so-celebrity fragrance. Like the quietly spoken perfume created for Jane Birkin (yes, as in the Hermès bag). By big-little house Miller Harris, it's called L'Air de Rien— roughly, "the air of nothing". No showbizzy PR machine. Only Birkin's doodlings adorn the bottle. "I have never liked perfumes," Birkin told British Vogue. She wanted the smell of empty drawers, her brother's hair (he co-wrote the screenplay for *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* as it happens). It's oakmossy, musky... exquisitely unidentifiable.

At next ritual wrist-sniffing, Cindy says, "You're wearing... I have no idea. What is that? Gorgeous." Smile.

## KEEP THEM GUESSING

1. Carthusia Caprissimo, \$100 for 50ml (03 9530 9070). A citrus-covered Italian isle with a twist of myrrh.
2. Serge Lutens L'Eau, \$200 for 100ml (meccacosmetica.com.au). The great Lutens backlashes against stadium names with an anti-fragrance— a scent that smells of clean rather than perfume.
3. Miller Harris L'Air de Rien, \$205 for 100ml (0422 351 611). Fragrance before fame, Birkin puts low-key loveliness first.
4. Rancé Le Vainqueur, \$167 for 50ml (07 3846 2227). A rediscovered citrus and spice classic first created for Napoleon Bonaparte.
5. Rancé Joséphine, \$185.50 for 50ml (07 3846 2227). Rose reinvigorated with hawthorn and rare ambergris— the scent created for Bonaparte's favourite squeeze.
6. Annick Goutal Ninfeo Mio, \$130 for 50ml (02 9663 4277). Fig. Sumptuous but with a fresh, green feel.