

## THE POLLUTANT PERFUME – Poison by Christian Dior, 1985

Mid-eighties mainstream Hollywood loved covering the workplace. It especially loved the revamped New York fairy tale that saw the lowly secretary make it onto the board against the odds and get off with the company vice president. Our heroine would invariably be shown racing out of the subway in her white trainers and then hobbling along the street as she got in to her stilettos ready for the revolving doors of her office block. For every screen treatment of a woman fighting to get to the top, there was another which zoomed in on the post-Happy Ever After moment, in which the female boss at the pinnacle of her career had become a heartless bitch or lost soul, in need of a lesson about real values. *Baby Boom* from 1987, for example, tells the story of a tough management consultant, played by Diane Keaton, retreating from the boardroom to Vermont, where she makes gourmet baby food, rediscovers herself and falls in love with a kind vet. In 1988's *Big*, it is toy-company executive Susan who, burned out by the end of her twenties, needs a boy-turned-man in the form of Tom Hanks to remind her about joy, fun and the pleasures of bouncing on trampolines.

To establish just how bitchy they were pre-makeover, these divas resorted to a number of easy-to-interpret shorthand gestures. One such was the overt waving about of a perfume bottle – especially effective if it was an atomiser with a squeezey bulb. In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (set in the 1930s), spoiled Shanghai club singer Willie is put through a few testing situations, such as being covered in insects and having to ride a stinky elephant through the jungle when she'd rather be back in her dressing room in a silk gown. To make the situation more bearable, she pours half a bottle of perfume on the elephant's head ('expensive stuff'). *Overboard's* catty heiress Joanna (played by Goldie Hawn), whose yacht has ended up in the hicksville harbour town of Elk Snout, sprays perfume in a cloud around the grubby carpenter who's been called in to build her a luxury shoe closet. And in 1988's *Working Girl*, the domineering and unlikeable director Katharine Parker, played by Sigourney Weaver, drowns herself in Shalimar as she plans to get back together with Harrison Ford's nice guy, Jack Trainer (he has other ideas). Perfume in these scenarios is the bedfellow of long, sharp, red-varnished nails – ostentatious and aggressive.

It is intriguing, if we refer back to the banning of Giorgio Beverly Hills from certain restaurants, that in the 1980s overt use of the decade's mega-perfumes started to be viewed as pernicious, construed as the wearer inflicting themselves on others – bullying them, even – by extending the throw of their shadow through smell.

A new sort of politesse in the use of scent was emerging; in the same way that it was thought inappropriate to apply a full face of make-up on public transport, abundant spraying of perfume in public was becoming vulgar. Even *New Scientist* chipped in, aggrieved by the 'gaseous anarchy' that the jangle of different fragrances was creating within the office environment. Their suggestion? To emulate 'one aspect of the war on tobacco – the widespread acceptance of smoke-free zones, on both aesthetic and health grounds', because 'your freedom to swing your fist ends where my nose begins'. Poison was among the most wicked of aggressors in this supposed war of the perfumes.

It marked a radically new direction for Parfums Christian Dior, quite different from the pared-down elegance of Edmond Roudnitska's fragrances such as Diorissimo and Diorella, and may have been a response to the provocations of Opium, from rival Yves Saint Laurent, and Coco, by Chanel. Created by perfumer Edouard Fléchier, Poison is a burning, psychotropic pastille of tuberose, this time with ripe plums and incense so as to be like something from a sacrificial rite, all swooning flowers and

braziers. It's wonderfully in your face with its bling, as though Liberace has come straight off the table from his latest facelift in a sequined operating gown, ready to play his white piano even as the anaesthetic wears off. But while the smell is, admittedly, not subtle, Poison was singled out more because of its prominence than because it was *particularly* offensive. Dior spent \$40 million dollars launching this scent globally, and it took on the profile of a viral contagion, becoming the most identifiable example of perfume excess; one suspects, however, that such notoriety can only have helped Dior's public relations campaign. After all, at the time of writing there are four versions, from Tendre Poison to Hypnotic Poison (the current bestseller). Choose your poison carefully.