

# The Scent of Your Breath

Melissa P.

Published by Serpent's Tail

**Please note that this extract contains scenes of an adult nature**

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

*I* threw myself into the streets of the world with a bee in my hair. A bee that buzzed among my tresses, beat its wings convulsively and buzzed, buzzed, buzzed. And I didn't brush it away, I let it build its hive in my head, and everyone who met me said, 'You've got hair like honey,' and didn't know that there was a bee in my head, rolling round playfully among my thoughts with its soft, bi-coloured body. And it kept me company, my bee did, it became an indispensable if not very trustworthy companion: sometimes it gave me little bites on the back of my neck that should have hurt me. But my bee was too small to hurt me; it left honey in me, but never poison.

One day the bee whispered something in my ear, but it was too faint a murmur for me to hear. I never asked what it had tried to say to me, and now it's too late, my bee flew away from my hair, all of a sudden, and a passer-by killed it. It was squashed. And on the white marble I can see a liquid gleaming, a substance; I pick it up with a little spatula and take it to an analytic laboratory.

'Poison,' the biologist tells me.

'Poison...' I repeat.



*W*ere you ok yesterday? When you got home and lit yourself a cigarette from the gas ring in the kitchen, when our cat rubbed against your neck, breath quivering, when you shut your eyes and folded your legs like a foetus, what did you think about? Were you ok?

My torments began when I said goodbye to you at the airport, when I came over and said, 'So did you get all that? You check in, go up those escalators and then through the metal detector' and I pointed to it with a finger, 'after which you go towards the gate marked on your boarding card, and you're there. Call me when you get home.'

That's what I said to you, and then I moved away, then came back and repeated it all word for word. I even repeated my gesture, pointing to the metal detector.

Finally I kissed you softly, our bodies apart, and whispered in your ear: 'Thank you.'

You, in a voice less harsh than mine, replied, 'Thank you, darling, thank you.'

That same evening I made love with Thomas. 'Let's do it as though it's the last time,' I said to him, looking him

straight in the eyes.

He hesitated for a moment, then asked, 'What do you mean?'

'Don't be stupid... nothing apocalyptic. Just an excess of love.'

'Why?' he asked, dumbfounded.

I shrugged. 'Because I've had enough of giving myself away piecemeal. I need to stretch to infinity.'

'But you always do that,' he said.

I shrugged again and snorted.

No, I've never stretched to infinity. I don't know infinity. What I know is boundaries, paralysis, impairment. No, not infinity, I wouldn't have said so.

'Let's do it this way. Imagine one of us dies tomorrow; imagine that one of us has to go travelling for years and years and then we had to each other again after a long time... or maybe never see each other again. How would you love me, how far would you go?'

He was extremely handsome, I was extremely beautiful. Warmed by the light from the lamp on the chest of drawers, which bathed our faces with specks of colour.

And when we made love he didn't exist, but he did exist and so did you. I existed, just an apparition. You and he loved me, tore me apart and kissed me. I saw your nose, his mouth, your ears and his eyes. I felt two hearts beating rather than one, and when my body surged I shouted, 'I love you so, so much,' and I was saying it to you as well.

You and he, guardians of my soul and my body. Presumptuously appearing on the terrace of my life, you watch and protect it as I have not asked you to, as I do not expect you to.

His sweat smelled like your neck, and his neck smelled of you. Then it was over. My eyelids lowered like the curtain after the show, and my soft, gratified breath merged with the smells of the room. And you stayed.

You've never made an attempt on my life or my liberty. You're so frail, and I'm too heavy. Now and again I'll have to silence all my theories of life to give more room to that extreme but gentle feeling I have for you.

Maybe you deserve that.

'A one-way ticket for Rome,' I said.

The man at the travel agency looked at me and smiled. 'Where are you off to this time?'

I looked at him for a moment, tracing every feature of his face inside my head.

'Home,' I replied.

He lowered his head as a sign of reverence and, looking furtively up at me, he said, 'Straight away.'

As he clicked away at the keys of his computer, I studied the brochures behind me. From the Congo to Laos, I could have gone anywhere. From Paris to Hokkaido. From Valparaiso to Athens. Endless possibilities spread out behind me, with many promises and few demands. I could have begun my escape straight away, since

I was there. But I was scared of the lack of responsibility, it's always frightened me.

'So you've decided on Rome?' the man asked.

I turned around and nodded with a smile.

'Do you want me to make you an electronic ticket?'

'No, please don't. I'd like to be able to hold it in my hand.'

It was like suddenly turning into the road I've seen so many times on the horizon from my street, the one I've been travelling down for such a short time, but I feel as though I've lived a hundred years already, half of those years spent well, the other half so-so, to put it optimistically.

It's always struck me as so impossible to reach the point where the two roads cross that I've indolently travelled the whole journey without wondering where it would take me to and what I would do when I got there.

All of a sudden I've found myself at the turning into that unknown street, which a gilded sign identified as 'Likely Street. You can go straight on or choose to turn left.'

So I looked back and I saw my footsteps leading to the place where the parallel lines of the street joined in a perfect perspective: the tarmac was half-destroyed, ruined by hail, rain, the wind, cratered and worn to the thinnest of crusts. I saw trails of blood where people had fallen, here and there I saw corpses lying naked and gaping. No trace of you. Just hints of a mumlian smell that spread along the lifeless, deserted street. I took another look at the gilded sign: it looked like the entrance to paradise. But someone

once told me that there is no better paradise than your own personal hell (or perhaps my conscience told me that, to give me an alibi?). In any case, I decided to tempt fate and, rather than continue along that grey street, which I reached by passing through a black hole shouting, 'Light! Light!' at the top of my voice, I sniffed the air and turned left, holding both hands crossed over my heart.

I took the airline ticket and held it delicately with two fingers: my ticket of entry.

As I left the agency, a thin line of cold made my skin ripple. I wrapped myself up in my coat (the red velvet one, the one Ornella thinks looks like a dressing-gown) and climbed the street called the *Acchianata di San Giuliano*. I decided to pass by *Piazza Crociferi*, where the excess and luxury of the baroque *vie* with the degradation, death and decomposition of those graffiti-scrawled houses, with flowers inexorably sprouting and withering from their stones. That's where I gave my first kiss, where I came to blows some halfwit, further over is the staircase where, one evening, I sipped a beer with a boy I didn't know, who didn't even ask for anything in return.

But no memory reawakened sensations that had been covered over by time.

So I went down, down as far as *Piazza dell'Elefante*, and all I saw was the grey coats of the council clerks.

I walked on towards the fishmonger's, and even there the only thing that came to mind was that time many years

ago when you, grandmother and I came here to buy fish; and the thing that struck me most that time had been the starfish on the back of the swordfish, which was still alive. A few, a very few memories, most of which are pointless and faded now.

If someone asked me which city I hated the most, I would say Catania. And I would give the same reply if they asked me which city I loved the most.

You've always told me that being far from your own land is the most painful thing imaginable. You've always told me that if and when I went away, I would feel homesickness grabbing me by the throat and dragging me down into a pit of sorrow and despair.

I told you that as far as I was concerned one place was pretty much the same as another, and that in fact Catania was the place I feared most, because Catania swallows people up.

Darkness, ash, lava cooled and congealed. In spite of the sun forever peeping among the baroque reliefs and the white lace curtains of the old houses in the centre, the whole city seems plunged in a big, endless, abysmal gloom. Catania is dark. It's as though it were sliding into a vast, gaping mouth, being pulled by an exhausted train. Catania's even like that when it seems that life can't be contained by its small squares and its stone-scratched streets, at night when young people, bag-snatchers, whores, drug addicts, families and tourists all arrange to meet in the same place, at the same time, leading to exotic, chaotic orgies. Catania is beautiful because it has no hierarchies,

because it has no time, because it is unaware of its fascination. It is beautiful like a naked woman, white-skinned and with black, black hair, opening her eyes wide when a brute clamps his hand over her mouth, hissing, 'Don't breathe, you whore.'

That's what Catania is like, a whore who doesn't speak because someone is suffocating her.

I am a deeply Catanian creature. I have both life and death within me, I'm not afraid of either. But sometimes my life tends towards death.

Often I hear people who have been away from home for too long being told that the only thing drawing them back to their own bed is their need to take possession of their own roots, to eviscerate the earth and reappropriate their roots in an act of vivisection. Roots? What the fuck kind of roots are they talking about? We aren't trees, we're human beings. Human beings who have sprung from a seed, and remain seeds for all eternity. If anything, the only place we have ever put down roots is in the womb.

And, if one day I want to return to my origins, if I want to eat my roots, I'll just have to rip open your belly, climb in with my whole body, and bind myself to you with a cord that is nothing but a fiction now.

But it wouldn't do me any good. I want to go on being a seed. I want to be my origin and my end. And I don't want to rot in the ground, any ground, I want the wind to carry me for ever. I don't want ordered spaces.