

The Scent of Death

Chapter 1

Most people assume they'd know the scent of death. That decay has a distinctive, readily identifiable odour, a foul reek of the grave.

They're wrong.

Decay is a complicated process. For a once-living organism to become skeletonized, reduced to dry bone and minerals, it first has to undergo an intricate biochemical journey. While some of the gases created are offensive to human senses, they're only part of the olfactory menu. Decomposing flesh can produce hundreds of volatile organic compounds, each with its own characteristics. Many of them – particularly those created during the mid stages of a body's dissolution, those of putrefaction and bloat – possess an undeniable stench. Dimethyl trisulphide, for instance, is reminiscent of rotting cabbage. Butyric acid and trimethylamine have the respective bouquets of vomit and old fish. Another substance, indole, carries the stink of faecal matter.

Yet in lower concentrations indole has a delicate, floral scent that's prized by perfume manufacturers. Hexanal, a gas produced in both the early and later stages of decay, resembles freshly cut grass, while butanol is redolent of fallen leaves.

The aroma of decomposition can encompass all these notes, as complex as a fine wine. And, because death is nothing if not full of surprises, in some circumstances it can announce itself in a different manner entirely. Sometimes in a way you'd least expect.