

CHANEL N° 5 by Victor Lodato

Having a life meant having a story. Even at eight, Edgar knew this.

What he didn't know was his own beginning. Newborn brains were mushy. If you wanted to know how your life had started, you had to get this information from other people.

But what if these people were liars?

'I kept falling asleep,' said Lucy. She was speaking of Edgar's birth. The boy liked this particular story, and so he made sure to roll his head in feigned boredom. 'Even with all the pain, I was, like –' Lucy opened her mouth and made a stupendous snore sound worthy of a cartoon character. 'It was nearly three in the morning when you decided to show your face.'

She tossed back her hair and turned to the mirror. 'And you didn't make a fuss either. Doctor said he'd never seen a kid care less about being born. Slip, slap, and back to sleep.'

'And then they put me in the box, right? In the glass box?'

'Yup. Because you were so small. And you didn't wake up for a week.'

Edgar didn't remember any of it.

'Size of a dinner roll,' Lucy said with a slight shudder. 'And so white, I thought you were a friggin' ghost.'

The boy looked up as his mother swiped a pink stick the color of cake frosting across her lips.

'Are you going out, Ma?'

'Yes, I am,' she said. 'Yes, I am.'

She had a habit of answering certain questions twice. The first time, full voice, part of normal conversation; the second time, a more private matter, as if she were gauging the truth or untruth of what she'd said. She repeated words to see if she could believe them. The second round lacked conviction. To Edgar, the echo always seemed tainted by sadness.

None of this mattered to him, though. He liked to listen to her, even though he knew she was slippery. He knew the story of his sleepy birth was nothing more than a ploy to soften him toward bed. Edgar didn't hold it against her. Her tricks were the tricks of a child. Transparent. If she lied, so what? At least she wasn't boring. From her mouth shot forbidden words with a marksman's precision. And she had red hair – and, as far as Edgar was concerned, there wasn't another person on the whole of Earth who had red hair. No one, anyway, who could lay claim to what his mother possessed.

Plus, she had the most delicious voice. Like the lady on the peanut butter commercial, Edgar thought. You could actually hear the peanuts in her voice. You could practically taste them. Watching his mother fuss with her make-up, Edgar wanted to bark like a dog. He'd done it before, he was good at it. Sometimes it made her laugh, if she was in the right mood.

But she wasn't in the right mood. Edgar could tell. It wasn't just the candied lips (the unabashed color highlighting his mother's natural pout), it was the dress as well – so tight it made her breathless, like his grandmother when she climbed the stairs. His mother was nervous. And now she was putting on the shoes that sank hopelessly into lawns, if she wore them to picnics – which she did sometimes, to the old woman's chagrin. The shoes were red, shiny as plastic apples. Dorothy's shoes, Edgar thought. The good witch! The bark erupted, beyond his control.

'Stop that,' Lucy said. 'You wanna wake up you-know-who?'

'No,' said Edgar. But then he did it again, this time adding a growl.

Even as Lucy glared at him, the boy could detect the smile held in check.

'You shouldn't even be up,' she said. 'But since you're here.' She did a little turn in front of him. 'How do I look?'

Bark.

Lucy smiled now without reservation, and then grazed the boy's cheek with her sticky mouth. 'And I don't want you snooping around when Mr S gets here. You hear me?'

They were always initials, the men. In respect for his father, Edgar supposed. His father who was dead, and who was always Frank. The other men were reduced to single letters, black flies over the bulk of his father's body. This was his mother's second date with Mr. S, who was a butcher. Edgar was astonished upon hearing it. It was like his mother was going out with a pig – or, even worse, a killer of pigs. From television, Edgar knew that there were machines one could employ to detect the microscopic bits of blood that were no doubt hiding on Mr S's clothing. After committing a murder, a criminal always washed vigorously, but there was always a spot left somewhere, some glimmer of evidence, if you knew where to look.

Poor Ma, thought Edgar. A butcher, a killer of pigs.

'Are you cooking him dinner?'

'Don't be ridiculous. Does it look like I'm cooking him dinner? We're going out.'

'Bed,' she said, swatting the boy's bottom.

Edgar sauntered away in mock desolation, dragging his feet. When he turned to look at her from the doorway, she was lost again in the mirror, applying a second layer of frosting.

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Edgar looked at himself in his own mirror. Pale skin, white hair, tired eyes a sea-glass shade of green. I should have oinked, he thought. He tried it out, but it wasn't nearly as good as the dog. He'd have to practice the pig. With his index finger he pushed up his nose. It was stunningly effective.

He was a small boy, skinny, with knobby knees that were constantly bumping into things. Wrists so thin the bones rose like the lurky eyes of an alligator. In movement he was awkward; in stillness he possessed a natural grace, remarkable van Eyck hands, a long neck worthy of Pontormo. But in the mirror all the boy saw was an insect. He didn't make sense; not to himself. Though he understood his paleness was a disease, it often seemed a curse. People stared. Plus, he lacked the meat of his fellow humans, the meat of his mother, his grandmother. He was more like the dead. More like his father.

'You don't eat,' Lucy was always saying.

But he did eat. He made an effort, anyway.

'One pea at a time,' Lucy once said to a friend.

'I do not!' Edgar had shouted. 'I eat lots of peas at the same time.'

When both women laughed, the boy stormed out of the room, nearly sick from the ferocity of his blushing.

'Leave him alone,' the grandmother would say. She was even larger than his mother, but she didn't mind Edgar's bones. She didn't mind that he was more like the dead, considering the fact that the dead man in question, Edgar's father, was her own son.

The boy tiptoed into the hallway and peered into the old woman's room. She was asleep on her back, her great Jiffy-Pop bosom moving up and down with comforting regularity. He walked straight into the dark bedroom without making a sound. One of the good things about being an insect, Edgar thought: no one can hear you when you walk across the floor. Most people made a lot of noise. Most people stomped. His mother was a stomper. And, with one footfall heavier

than the other – a telltale limp for which Edgar knew no tale – the sound was hers, and hers alone. You always knew when she was coming.

The old woman, on the other hand, for all her heft, could appear suddenly behind you, out of nowhere. If she weren't a person you loved, she might terrify you. 'The creeper,' Lucy called her. Sometimes Lucy jolted at the creeper's unexpected materializations and Edgar would have to suppress a laugh. It was funny to see his fearless mother jump at the sight of a fat old lady. It was a great routine. It never failed. Edgar wondered if the two of them rehearsed it while he was at school.

Entering his grandmother's bedroom at night (he'd done it before) felt like entering a cave where animals lived. He wasn't scared. A small white votive candle housed in a blue glass cup burned at all hours, and at night threw a living splash of light on the face of Mary. The whole room was enlivened in a gentle but peculiar way. The room seemed larger, and then smaller, and then, if you stood very still, you could feel the light moving on your body, making you part of the mysterious scheme. The candlelight was up to something, Edgar knew. He could feel its miraculous little brain ticking away.

The boy touched Mary's small plaster head. He liked the way her clasped hands warmed themselves over the fire, like the bums on Tulaney Avenue when the weather turned cold. Great sparking flames leaping from trash cans. 'Don't stare,' his grandmother would say if the two of them were walking by. But Edgar couldn't help himself. To him, the bums seemed wonderful, living, as they were, in their play town of cardboard boxes and rags and plastic bags. They were like Boy Scouts gone bad. One afternoon Edgar had locked eyes with a particularly ravaged man in a yellow ski jacket – a fringy red scarf wrapped around his head like a pirate. He'd winked at Edgar, making the boy blush. It almost felt as if the man had kissed him.

Now he waited for the Virgin to wink at him, and when she didn't (she never did), he made his way toward the old woman's bed. He was barely touching the earth. On nights like this, gravity had no power over Edgar. The laws were the laws of space: quixotic, effortless, dangerous. One wrong move, one wrong thought, and the world as you knew it would be whisked away, replaced by some grinning immensity. When he finally willed himself down, it was to the floor beside the bed. The thing he liked best was here: a night-light, a small disk of frosted glass, bearing, in delicate relief, the figure of an angel on a bridge. A tiny lightbulb the size of an almond, cleverly concealed behind the glass, brought the scene to life. The angel's dainty foot, toe pointed, hovered just above the bridge. It was a still picture, but Edgar didn't see it that way. He saw movement. He saw the angel descend, he saw her breathe.

Edgar rarely thought about his father when he looked at the angel, even though he knew – but only vaguely, a borrowed memory – that his father had died on a bridge. But that was a long time ago, before Edgar had yet to utter his first word. And so, to the boy, the father remained in the lump and shadow of a half-lived dream. His father was something at the edge of things, but he wasn't a person, exactly. There wasn't enough light behind him to cast his undoing into a satisfactory story. When his mother and grandmother talked about Frank, it was confusing. It was like the two women were talking about an imaginary friend – and there seemed to be some ongoing argument about ownership. Edgar couldn't participate in the game; he had no credentials, no leverage. It was infuriating.

In private, alone with her son, Lucy never mentioned Frank. The grandmother, on the other hand, was less cooperative. Sometimes she cornered the boy and spoke, in theatrical whispers, about her dead son. It was like a fairy tale. Frankie, she called him, sometimes Francesco – often with a cockeyed expression on her face. At such moments, Edgar wondered if his grandmother was a little dim, or possibly she was mad. 'When he was your age,' she would say, or, 'When your father was little . . .' It made Edgar dizzy. It was like the old woman was playing with a time machine – and, even worse, she was trying to tempt Edgar inside. But Edgar didn't want to go with her to where this other boy lived, this fairy-tale boy who was supposedly his father: a lump, a limp body on a dark road the old woman was trying to flood with light.

'Uh-huh,' Edgar would say. 'Can I go outside?'

He didn't like to think about that stuff.

But now, as he sat before the night-light, he found himself wondering: what was the point of an angel on a bridge unless she was there to save you? Otherwise, she was just holding up traffic.

The old woman stirred in bed, but didn't wake. Edgar turned and watched her breathe. He could have easily climbed under the covers with her (she never minded), but, instead, he floated over to the bureau and opened the top drawer. Don't creak, he prayed, glancing at the Virgin for support. The top drawer was skinnier than the rest, like the pencil drawer in a desk, and it was filled with cards. Prayer cards. Small laminated rectangles, each with a flashy saint on one

side, and, on the other, a name, some dates, and a prayer. They were all dead people! And though his grandmother was generally a very neat person, the cards in the drawer were a helter-skelter mess, as if she'd been playing a game of Go Fish. Edgar joined in the fun and shuffled them a bit, before picking one at random and slipping it into his pocket. Why? No reason. The drunkenness of not sleeping when you should be sleeping. It was his first theft.

After that, there was no stopping him. His eyes went straight to the bottle of Chanel N° 5. He loved its solid shape, the heavy glass stopper, the simple lettering, black on white. It could have said Arsenic or Sulfur, it belonged in a laboratory, or a storybook; it could have said drink me. His grandmother had had it forever. It was ancient. Edgar knew this was something special. The amber liquid inside the hollow ice cube came from a source that no longer existed. It had to be preserved, which is why, he supposed, his grandmother never used it. For as long as he could remember, the bottle had remained half full. The level never varied. Still, half full meant half empty, which meant his grandmother had been less careful in the past, more certain things would last.

Edgar didn't think these things, exactly; he felt them. He felt that his grandmother had a past, sometimes merely by the way she turned her head, as if there were a breeze blowing through her hair. But there was no breeze – and certainly there was no hair. His grandmother was nearly bald and regularly wore a bandana on her head like a hoodlum.

The past was also in her closet, where there were outrageous dresses – some with tiny sparkles sewn in, some with beads. Dresses that, if she were to put on now, she'd split open like the Incredible Hulk when he turned green. Among the many photos on top of his grandmother's bureau, there was one in which the old woman was young and impossibly slim, with a cigarette in her hand and a sharp-fanged fox wrapped around her neck. It was all so strange. His grandmother had been alive such a long time that she had traded one face for another. Or perhaps someone had stolen the first one. Edgar knew nothing. The only feat of logic he managed (a good one) was that there had once been perfume-wearing days, and that, now, they were over. Anyway, she wouldn't miss a few drops.

As soon as Edgar touched the bottle (it was cold!), the old woman awoke, as if the boy had put his hand on her.

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.' He retracted his fingers.

'Why aren't you in bed? Is something wrong?'

The boy shook his head and drifted toward the old woman. There was no fear. He touched the blanket where it covered her arm.

'Where's your mother? She go out?'

Edgar knew better than to answer this question. He shrugged languorously. His grandmother didn't approve of the men. Suitors, she called them, even though most of them wore jeans. If she was ever downstairs when one of them came to claim Lucy, she retreated into the kitchen and made a very loud cup of instant coffee, clanging the spoon like a Salvation Army Santa wielding a bell.

Her pudgy red hand emerged from under the blanket and covered the boy's cold fingers with a blissful warmth. 'Get me a glass of water, would you, sweetheart? That Chinese was salty.'

Florence was referring to the cartons of food that Lucy had brought home for dinner. Such surprise attacks of to-go fare irked the old woman. She was the cook in the family, she cooked beautifully – who could deny it? – and the idea of restaurant food in her own house, well, it bordered on insult. Why couldn't she be permitted to cook every single meal of their lives? She was willing to do it. It was her joy.

At least the Chinese was tasty. She'd give it that. The old woman liked a little fire now and then, and had consumed the incendiary broccoli in chili sauce with formidable gusto. When she sat up, a prolonged burp rolled out of her. 'Oh, it's repeating on me.'

Edgar turned on the light in Florence's bathroom.

'Let the tap run for a minute,' she called out, 'or it'll be full of clouds.'

Edgar knew the rules. When he returned with the water, it was crystalline. He sat on the edge of the bed while she drank the entire glass.

‘Ahhhh, that hits the spot.’ The old woman’s tongue darted in and out of her mouth in an intriguing lizard-like fashion.

‘Tomorrow, I’m going to make meatballs,’ she said.

But tomorrow wasn’t Sunday. Meatballs on a Thursday? Edgar sensed the competition. He knew his mother didn’t care for meatballs. Too much fat. Once, she’d tried to convince the old woman to make them out of ground turkey, and the old woman had looked at his mother like she was insane. ‘Turkey? What do you mean?’ It was as if Lucy had suggested she make them out of socks, out of sawdust. For days after the suggestion, when Lucy wasn’t around, the old woman, in Edgar’s presence, would shake her head and mutter, ‘Turkey, my foot.’

Anyway, Edgar liked the meatballs. When his grandmother made them, she always put one, freshly fried, on a small white plate, before delivering the rest into the bubbling sauce. A special gift. A naked sauceless meatball, just for him.

‘You’re turning him into a real Italian,’ Lucy once joked.

‘He is Italian,’ the old woman replied without levity.

‘Half Italian,’ Lucy corrected. ‘I’m not Italian.’

‘No, you’re not, dear.’ Upon which, the old woman put her hand on the boy’s head and watched him eat his naked meatball.

Lucy was never up to fighting for her own team. The Polish. What had the Polacks ever done for her? These Italians had taken care of her, at least. And, besides, this was the old woman’s house. Lucy had never meant to stay here all these years after her husband’s death, but here she was. And there was the boy, happy, eating.

Actually, the boy was not undilutedly happy. His mother, his grandmother, yes, it was true: to be alone with either of them was sweetness itself. But combine them and things tightened, a constriction Edgar felt in his sensitive, divining throat. When the two women spoke to each other, Edgar felt their untrue voices somehow coming from inside his own body, as if he were the liar. But what was it all about? Why did their voices change in each other’s presence? He saw a great deal at 21 Cressida Drive, but understood little. The first time he did the math and realized that there was no actual blood shared by his mother and his grandmother, it frightened him. Technically, they were strangers.

If Frank were around maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, thought Edgar. Frank could take on some of the responsibility. But Frank was dead – and, as far as Edgar could see, dead people didn’t do anything except get whispered about in kitchens. If there was a ghost, it was the name itself, hissed or swallowed, breathy air between the two women.

Both were widows. Another complexity they had in common. Edgar remembered the old woman’s husband better than he remembered his own father, which wasn’t saying much. Still, there were a few things he could manage to recall: the thick cloud of cigar smoke around his grandfather’s La-Z-Boy; how the old man never called him by his name but referred to him only as boy, the word often shouted in a fairly startling tone. Sometimes the old man walked in circles in the yard, talking, it seemed, to himself. Edgar would watch from his bedroom window on the second floor. Even at five, the boy knew it was possible the old man wasn’t talking to himself, but to Frank.

People were still talking about Frank, in one way or another. Edgar wasn’t easily fooled. Brought up in a haunted house, he had a keen sense of when someone was conversing with the dead. A person could be stirring red sauce or putting on lipstick when, in fact, what she was really doing was walking through a cemetery. Widows! They were almost like witches, weren’t they? They were deathly. They had secrets.

Edgar reflected on the fact that he had never seen his mother, not once, set foot in his grandmother’s bedroom. Edgar couldn’t even imagine her here, especially at night, with the Virgin rubbing her hands over the flame and the angel floating in her dress of light. He knew it was not an atmosphere in which his mother would be able to breathe. He knew, if she walked in here, she would immediately fall dead.

‘What are you thinking about, Mr Big Eyes?’

He looked at the old woman from his perch at the side of the bed. She was already falling back asleep.

‘Grammar?’

‘Yes?’ she said. She was patient with the boy, with his silent staring spells. With his darling little thoughts, which is how she imagined the things that moved inside his head. In fact, she saw them, the boy’s thoughts, little blue wheels rolling over sunny pastures. She was drifting off.

‘Tell me,’ the old woman said. But her eyes were already closed.

‘Can I have some of the perfume?’ Edgar whispered.

‘Mmmh,’ the old woman sighed, fading.

‘I can?’

Edgar knew she was gone. Her breathing changed. He watched her bosom float away on sea waves. There was no embarrassment. He knew her body better than his own. Better than his mother’s, certainly. It was the old woman’s bed he climbed into after a bad dream. Nightmares weren’t uncommon with the boy, and the old woman always welcomed him, should he gently wake her, at any hour, with his delicate hand.

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Lucy knew. Sometimes she’d hear the boy gasp, coming out of one of his dreams. She’d hear his bed creak as he got up to find comfort, not with her. She didn’t mind the boy’s choice. She had enough trouble sleeping as it was. The old woman slept like a stone. Not that Lucy would ever prevent the boy from climbing into her bed. She would accept her duty, gladly, should Edgar ever call her to it. But he spent more time with the old woman; certain tracks got laid, certain habits. Was Lucy jealous? No. No. She didn’t mind the physical fact of Edgar’s choice, but sometimes she just didn’t care for the idea of it. There were nights, of course, when she craved a body next to her. Yet, even then, she knew the boy wouldn’t be enough to ease her loneliness. He might make it worse, his skinny sleeping body instinctively burrowing into hers for warmth. What room did she have for such innocence? The bodies she craved tended toward violence.

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Edgar eased himself off his grandmother’s bed and went straight for the bottle. He had permission, didn’t he? He touched it (still cold); he lifted it and pressed it to his cheek. The ghost of a scent lingered on the glass. When he removed the stopper and pointed his nose toward the opening, he knew to close his eyes. Powder and flowers and spice – and now sweet grass, sweet sweat. He tilted the bottle and wet his finger, quickly carrying the precious fluid to the taut skin just behind his right ear, then behind his left, as he’d seen women do on television. The liquid tingled, a subtle electrification, as the scent changed, bloomed, became an extension of the boy himself. It was Edgar; Edgar electrified by flowers. The charge was exhilarating, and he could feel the rush of his blood. He stole some more, just a bit, and swiped it across the front of his neck.

Time stopped, as it rarely does. The boy breathed, unnoticed by life or death. Breathed himself into himself. It was as if there were two of him, and each kissed the other, agreeing on something. Exactly what, neither could say. They could only say: yes, this. This.

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He stood in the hallway. Eight years old, sleepy – someone should have sent him to bed. He looked toward his room, and sent himself.

But wait. A burble of laughter. Or was it an owl? Edgar leaned against the wall, listening. The sound was coming from downstairs. He moved toward the banister. The owl was his mother.

But the sound was wrong. His mother's real laugh was something else, flames shooting from a ten-story building. Nothing could put it out but the fire itself. And if you stood too close, you were doomed. It was a leaping, contagious cackle. But downstairs, now, it sounded like a doll's laugh. High-pitched but breathy, like a paper horn, spiking at intervals, steady and mechanical. Maybe it wasn't his mother. As he walked down the stairs, he wondered if he was in the right house. Sleepiness was doing funny things to the pictures on the walls. Where there should have been a painting of a sailboat, there was now a painting of a huge sunlit cleaver emerging from the sea. At the bottom of the stairs, he caught a glimpse of his grandmother's black piano, an impeccably polished upright that seemed to have gained some weight since last he saw it. He regarded it as if for the first time – the keys like loose teeth, bright whites and rotting blacks that could fall out at any moment. Maybe that's why no one played it anymore. Someone, he noticed, had turned down a few of the framed photographs that rested on top.

And the boy could smell cigarettes, and cigarettes weren't allowed in the house. After the old man had died, Florence had said, enough (her exact words were 'I'm done with that stink'). His mother was supposed to smoke on the porch.

Hee hee hee, went the doll, as Edgar entered the living room. Mr S quickly pulled his meaty hand from between Lucy's legs.

'Eddie,' he boomed from the couch. 'Eddie, my man!'

Lucy tugged at her dress. There was a sweating bottle of booze on the coffee table, the vodka she kept in the freezer (it never froze, to Edgar's amazement).

'What are you doing up? What did I tell you?' Lucy brushed back her hair with her fingers. Her pink lips were slightly smeared.

'I thought you were going out.' Edgar didn't look at his mother. He watched the cigarette in the ashtray, watched the forbidden smoke rise in curls of script. 'I wasn't spying on you. I didn't know it was you.'

'Who else would it be?' said Lucy, standing, putting her hands on her hips like a sixteen-year-old.

How old was she anyway? Edgar wasn't sure. Thirty, maybe, but she looked a lot younger, standing like that, and with her lips smeared like she'd been eating jam.

The butcher stood as well. Edgar couldn't see any blood on his clothing. Still, he wasn't pleased when the man moved toward him.

'He's all right. Just checking on his mom.'

The man touched the boy's head with the same hand that had been between Lucy's legs. As well as inside pigs and chickens and cows. Edgar froze.

'Whoa,' the butcher said. 'What do you smell like?' He leaned in and began to sniff.

'Na-nothing,' Edgar stuttered, taking two steps back.

But the butcher pursued him. 'Is that perfume?'

'No. I spilled something.'

Edgar suddenly wished he could fart. He had heard that there was a boy in his school who could fart on command. Edgar couldn't even manufacture a burp, a skill that every other boy in the world seemed to possess. Supposedly it was just a matter of swallowing air, but how did one swallow air? Edgar pressed his knees together and prayed for flatulence.

Lucy was sniffing now, too. The boy waited for a snotty comment from a sixteen-year-old, but, instead, his mother smiled. Her face relaxed, as if something important had been clarified. A tiny whoosh of air streamed from her nose. Was she laughing at him? She leaned down and kissed the boy's lips. She stared into his eyes and stroked his hair.

Edgar knew she was drunk. They had shared odd moments like this before – moments in which the world dropped away and it was just the two of them, half-asleep, with a nervous red thread quivering between their chests.

‘Oh, baby,’ she said, shaking her head. More air came out of her nose, three short bursts of it. Sometimes, to Lucy, it all seemed so absurd. Again, she kissed the boy. Her burden. Her funny little albino fruitcake.

‘I should get going,’ the butcher said.

‘Hold your horses,’ Lucy barked. And then sweetly, softly, to Edgar: ‘Would you please go to fucking bed?’

The boy nodded, but didn’t move. Why was his face burning? Why did he feel like crying?

Lucy turned, put out her cigarette, and grabbed the butcher’s arm. ‘Come on. I want to go to Larson’s.’

‘We can have a drink at my place,’ he suggested.

‘I don’t want to be in a house,’ Lucy said. ‘I want to be out.’ She heard her voice – sharp and ridiculous – as if it were coming from a woman standing beside her. Why was she getting so riled up? The man was going to think she was a bitch. She adjusted her dress and, in an effort to get back on track, slipped two fingers between the buttons of the butcher’s shirt and caressed his belly.

Edgar watched them as they put on their coats in the foyer. He waited for his mother to look back, but she didn’t. Only the butcher looked back. He stared at the boy and offered no discernible gesture of farewell. Edgar closed his eyes, hoping the man could no longer smell the scent that, amazingly, almost diabolically, still lingered upon his skin.

Chanel N° 5 is an excerpt from Victor Lodato’s new novel, *Edgar and Lucy*, to be published in March.