

Fart Man

“You guys ready to go?” French asked his four junior associates at the table, all of whom had worked with him on the merger. French was a large man, burly but not fat, with a barrel chest and silver-gray hair combed straight back. He had played football at Princeton, back when a man his size could still play on the defensive line. The associates, just a few years out of college and three decades younger than French, recognized his comment as a statement more than a question and nodded agreeably. French signaled to the waiter, who hustled to the table.

“Yes, Mr. French?” the waiter asked solicitously. He was a Hispanic man in a crisp white shirt and black bow tie,

“We’ll get the check,” French said. As the waiter turned to go, French rattled the ice cubes in his empty cocktail glass. “Can I get a Tito’s on the rocks with a lemon to go?”

“I don’t know if we can do that, Mr. French,” the waiter said. He was an older man with neatly parted gray hair and melancholy brown eyes. “The law does not allow us to take liquor out of the restaurant.”

“See what you can do, okay?” French advised. The waiter nodded noncommittally.

Bennett French turned to his team. “You guys did a great job. We got the *fracking* deal done.” The associates smiled knowingly at the pun, which French had been using since they began work to merge the country’s two largest shale gas producers. French picked up a large, nearly empty wine glass. “Cheers,” he offered. The others around the table raised their wine glasses, also mostly empty. “Nice, huh?” French added as he swirled the wine in his glass and admired the ruby color. He rested his nose over the bowl of the glass and inhaled deeply. He swirled the wine again and took a large sip, holding the liquid in his

mouth—lips pursed, eyes closed—before swallowing. “It’s not easy to find a 2005 Burgundy,” he said.

The waiter returned with the check folded inside a large leather portfolio. French took his reading glasses from the breast pocket of his blazer. As he opened the portfolio to peruse the long bill, the waiter set a coffee cup with a lid on the table beside him. “Here you are, Mr. French,” he offered. “To go.”

“You’re a star,” French said. “What’s your name?”

“Manuel, sir.”

“*You are a star, Manuel.*” French pulled a credit card from his wallet and set it next to the check. He took out a \$20 and slid it to Manuel who palmed it quickly. French picked up the coffee cup and gave it a shake, the ice cubes clinking inside. “That’s what I like to hear,” he pronounced. He closed the leather binder on the check and his credit card. With this symbolic end to the meal, the four associates pulled out their phones, as if they had practiced the synchronized movement. With his reading glasses still perched on his nose, Bennett French checked his own phone. “Holy shit,” he exclaimed. “Fart Man is four blocks from here! My buddy just texted me. Have you heard about this guy? *Fart Man.*”

The associates were silent. “I’ve read about him,” Max replied eventually. He was small and lithe, a former cross-country runner who still held the New Jersey high school record for the 1,500 meters. He had ordered the sea bass, even though the restaurant was famous for its steaks. “The *New Yorker* did a piece on him,” Max said. “It’s beyond disgusting.”

French laughed. “You have to see it to believe it,” he said excitedly. “A month ago, this guy was homeless. Now he’s got people lining up around the block to give him money.”

One of the young women, Aria, typed quickly on her phone. “Oh my god,” she exclaimed as she stared at the screen. “Is this for real?” She had dark eyes and olive skin, a bequest from her Argentine mother and Lebanese father, who had met in business school at Columbia. Her black hair was pulled tightly back in a ponytail. Aria had ordered the ribeye, medium rare, explaining amiably to the group that her Argentine mother would be disappointed if she ordered anything else.

“My buddy says you got to see it to believe it,” French said. “Four blocks from here, Seventh Avenue at the Park. Who’s in?”

“Not me,” Max said.

“You may never get another chance to see this,” French insisted.

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Max replied.

“Who or what is Fart Man?” Sasha asked. She had a long face with almond eyes and wavy brown hair that would have been unruly on someone less attractive. There was a scab across her nose where the swinging door to the firm’s copy room had hit her in the face. Her “heroic injury” was a source of team bonding in the final frenetic days of the merger. Aria held up her screen up so Sasha could read it. After a moment, Sasha asked, “Really?”

RC, tall and muscular as befitting his former role as captain of the Princeton crew team, looked at Aria’s screen. “Wow,” he added with no inflection. He had thinning hair with longish sideburns and bad skin, but it was his large, gangly frame that most people noticed, especially as he sat in a seat made for a smaller person, like an adult visiting a kindergarten classroom. RC had ordered the tenderloin. He had also eaten half of Sasha’s shrimp scampi and a sizeable portion of Aria’s ribeye.

“We have to see this,” French said as he stood. “Actually, let me clarify so the compliance folks don’t crawl up my ass again. No one is required to go. *Dinner is now officially over*. But we should go, really. You won’t get another chance like this.”

“Good night everyone,” Max said with a small wave. “Tell Fart Man I say hello.” He retrieved his suit jacket from the back of his chair. Manuel rushed over to help him put it on.

Bennett and the three junior associates walked toward the park. They spotted the crowd from a block away, an arc of people two and three deep on the sidewalk. “Come on,” French instructed as they reached the wall of onlookers. He and RC pushed aggressively through the crowd; Sasha and Aria followed like running backs behind their blockers.

“That’s him,” Bennett pronounced loudly as they reached the front. A small Vietnamese man in a tattered suit jacket was sitting on a stool. A muscular Black man in a dirty white tee shirt stood beside him holding a wad of bills and scanning the crowd like a bouncer. “Both these guys were homeless three weeks ago,” Bennett said excitedly. “You have to admire their creativity. This is what gives me faith in the future.”

“Is this for real?” Sasha asked the group. RC, nearly a foot taller, shrugged.

“Just watch,” Bennett French admonished them.

“Hey, frat boys,” the bouncer said loudly, pointing to three young white guys in jeans and sweatshirts standing in the front row. “You’re up.” One of young men handed a \$20 bill to the bouncer, who added it to his wad of cash. “Stand there,” the man ordered, motioning to a spot in front of the Vietnamese man on the stool. “Raise your hand when you’re ready.” He looked back to the crowd. “Who wants to go next?”

Four young women stepped tentatively forward. “She does!” one of the women said as she pointed to her friend.

“No, you go!” her friend insisted.

“Yes or no?” the bouncer asked impatiently. “If you want to be up next, it’s twenty dollars. Stand in front of those guys.” He turned to Bennett French. “What about you, Wall Street?”

“You guys want to do it?” French asked his associates. “It’s on me.”

“I’m good,” Sasha said. RC and Aria shook their heads.

The Vietnamese man sat erectly on his stool and stared forward. The three young men stood in front of him. “This is hard,” one of them said.

“Thirty seconds, guys, or we’re going to the next group,” the bouncer said.

One of the young men, short and stocky in a Rutgers hoodie, raised his arm. “Okay, I’m ready,” he said. The bouncer grabbed the young man’s shoulders and moved him so that he was standing directly in front of the Vietnamese man on the stool. A murmur of excitement passed through the onlookers. The Vietnamese man raised both his hands, palms out, signaling for quiet.

“Watch this,” Bennett French advised the associates. “This is unbelievable. Only in America.”

“Go when you’re ready,” the Vietnamese man said to his client. A hush settled over the audience. The young man leaned forward slightly from the waist and farted, loud enough for Bennett French and his co-workers to hear. There was gentle clapping from the crowd.

With his nose just inches from the young man’s ass, the Vietnamese man cupped his hand and waved the flatulence towards his nose.

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” RC said.

“This is repulsive,” Sasha said.

“Keep watching,” Bennett French advised. “You’ll be amazed.”

The Vietnamese man said loudly, “You are from New Jersey.” The young man’s two friends screamed in agreement, “Yes!” The crowd cheered. The Vietnamese man nodded gracefully to acknowledge their adulation. “Also, you had corned beef for lunch.” The young man clapped his hands, looking back over his shoulder at the man on the stool. “That’s right!” he exclaimed loud enough for the crowd to hear, prompting more applause.

The Vietnamese man took another deep sniff, closing his eyes as he contemplated the scent. “You need to get more sleep.”

“That’s totally true, man!” one of the buddies yelled.

The Vietnamese man continued, “You will marry well and have two healthy children.”

“Mary Beth?” One of the young man’s friends asked. “Is he going to marry Mary Beth?”

The Vietnamese man leaned back towards the young man’s ass and inhaled deeply. “Not Mary Beth,” he said softly.

“Thank god for that!” one of the Jersey guys said.

“Easy man,” the farter admonished his buddy. “Who am I going to marry?” he asked.

The Vietnamese man went back for another sniff. Bennett French raised his phone to take a photo, prompting the bouncer to step forward, wagging his finger. French pulled a money clip from his jacket pocket and peeled off a \$20. The black man took the cash and nodded approval. French took a series of photos as the Vietnamese man leaned close to the ass of his client, waving the aroma towards his nose. “Twenty bucks for a photo,” he said admiringly as he studied his screen. “These guys are monetizing the whole operation.”

“You will meet her, your wife, in graduate school,” the Vietnamese man said.

“What kind of graduate school?” the young man asked anxiously, looking back over his shoulder. “Business school?”

“That’s all,” the Vietnamese man answered. “I’ve lost the scent.” The client stepped away, exchanging fist bumps with his friends.

“Now one of you girls,” the bouncer instructed. Raise your hand when you’re ready. The Vietnamese man sat patiently on his stool as the bouncer lined up the four girls in front of him. Just as one of the girls raised her arm, two New York City police officers began pushing through the crowd: a stout Black woman, made stouter by her bulletproof vest, and her partner, a tall white man with a goatee. The bouncer gave a signal to his Vietnamese partner, who stood up quickly and picked up his stool.

“What’s going on here, gentlemen?” the female officer asked.

“Enjoying the evening, officer,” the Black man answered.

“Don’t make us take you downtown,” the female officer said, more bored than annoyed. “This is the second time this week.”

Bennett French stepped forward and asked loudly, “What’s the problem, officers?”

“*Who are you?*” the female officer asked, looking French up and down. “Take two steps back.” Her partner sidled up beside her.

Bennett French did not take two steps back. “How could they possibly be breaking the law?” he asked.

“*Take two steps back, sir,*” the female officer repeated.

Bennett French scrunched his face in puzzlement, as if she had asked him to hop on one foot. “Please tell me it’s not against the law to smell someone’s farts,” he said. There were

titters of laughter in the crowd. "Am I right?" French asked the crowd. "This is America!" he said, drawing desultory applause.

The female officer stared intently at French and decided that trying to get him to take two steps back was neither important in the moment, nor worth the effort. "They need a street performer's license," she said.

"It's not a problem officers," the Vietnamese man said. He was holding his stool under one arm. He turned and walked quickly in the other direction, disappearing into the park. The Black man was already gone. Neither officer followed them.

"These guys were homeless," Bennett French said to the police officers. "Now they're working hard."

"We don't make the laws," the male officer said.

"You think he pays taxes on that income?" the female officer asked.

"You got me there," Bennett French said agreeably.

"Let's all call it a night everyone," the male officer announced loudly. "Fart Man has left the building."

Bennett French looked at his phone again. "Check that out," he said, showing an image to Sasha.

"You captured it," she said.

"I have to text this to my wife," French said. There was a whoosh as the photo was dispatched to Westchester County. "Can one of you guys call an Uber?" French asked his young associates.

"Done," RC replied. "Chas Z in a red Camry is two minutes away."