

The Gastronomer



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I'm not sure I can identify the smell.

Not due to a lack of effort. I'm trying. Hard. But I've been at it for ten minutes now and I'm no closer to an identity. I *am* a little closer to vomiting though.

There's just something so abnormally foul about it. The list of scented nouns I'm able to draw from contains nothing this foul.

Or at least nothing similarly foul.

When I was twelve, I walked by a nail salon with an unrelated adult male my mom made me address as Uncle Mitch.

As soon as Uncle Mitch and I were close enough to inhale what smelled like burning hair amplified through the olfactory equivalent of a megaphone, he was sent into a flashback of Viet Nam.

I'm assuming it was the smell that did it. The Vietnamese woman shouting things like "you come in for nail!" might have contributed.

Either way, every time I walk by a nail salon now and get that whiff of burning hair (or whatever it is), I flash back to Uncle Mitch mumbling furiously.

While that smell is really sharp and awful, that's not this. This is probably worse than that, but mostly just different. So different that I doubt this one has the power to flash anyone to anything.

Being as I've officially entered minute eleven without a proper diagnosis, I'm starting to submit to the only-slightly-conceited thought that I own the first set of nostrils this scent has ever passed through (among the first batch anyway; I'm not currently alone).

The less-conceited realization that accompanies that thought is this: I'm doing a poor job of playing its scribe. I would hope Samuel Johnson would have fired me by now (in search of a better Boswell being the joke... which isn't even sort of funny being as I had to explain it).

I would consider excusing any further attempt to describe this odor with "you just have to be here", but the past tense version of that excuse is perhaps the most offensive utterance lips are capable of rendering.

Imagine if Fitzgerald did that.

"Myrtle got hit by a car... you had to be there."

I'm pretty sure no one has ever had to be anywhere for anything. In the history of the galaxy, no untellable tale has ever occurred. The only thing that matters is whether or not its witness can tell the story properly.

And the story is really all there is in life. So I'll do my best.

My best: what I'm smelling right now is what I suspect a clump of cottage cheese would smell like if it were balled up in a maxi pad during the Reagan administration.

That mixed with a wet, dead hen in a grocery sack. And some Lawry's seasoning salt.

That doesn't quite capture it, but it's the best description I can come up with given the noun list I've been exposed to prior to this moment.

Either way, whatever the smell, my reaction might still be just a little bit undignified.

From the outside looking in, my knotted expression probably likens me to a coal miner sniffing luxury. But from the inside sniffing out, it feels a lot more like luxury catching wind of the coal miner. While the reality is probably somewhere in between, it doesn't really matter, being as the sample size of potential spectators is so low ($n=6$) and each of them appears to be among the "you had to be there" variety. So I'm not worried.

While not worried (but increasing nauseated), I'm sitting in chair that I can say with near-absolute certainty was made from an antique bicycle's wicker basket.

At the height of my sternum (anterior shield of my vomit cage) is a table for two. Because my generally moody disposition equates to dim romantic prospects, it's a table for me. The busboy calls it "thirty-one."

While calling it that, his Cro-Magnon-looking forehead is sweating heavily into his eyeballs and his hands look like they belong to a metal worker. The site of him is hardly an appetite enhancer.

That's one of the reasons I find it weird that this is what he's chosen to do for a wage.

But I don't feel like I should have to be the one to tell him that. So in my free time (which would have otherwise been spent having that conversation), I'm looking around.

From my table, I have a pretty good view of the restaurant. I'm on the second floor, but it's not really a floor; it's more like a lofted bedroom. The back half of the restaurant has two levels, each with a fifteen-foot ceiling. The front half is a single floor with a thirty-foot ceiling. And I'm perched on the edge of the second floor, overlooking the lobby. And currently, I'm looking at the door I walked in twenty minutes ago. And passed that door, through the storefront windows, at my car. In case this stench gets any worse, I want to have an escape plan in place.

The table to my left is “thirty-two” (busboy, 2007).

It’s empty. I can guess why.

Had that table been occupied though, its gagging occupants would have been sitting directly over the kitchen.

Inside this kitchen is a chef who appears to be exactly as old as time. I know this because he greeted me as I walked in. And I’m good at judging age.

I commented on his hat.

It looked like a yeast-risen biscuit. The exact words I used were “I like your hat.”

He didn’t respond. He just twisted his face’s ancient parts at me in a way that I didn’t quite understand. Or pretend to. I think he meant it to be expressive, but the expression was as ambiguous as the emoticon faces teenage girls make out of colons and parentheses when they decide “lol” won’t sufficiently capture what it is they wish to communicate.

The contorted chef face might have become more awkward than it was had the exchange lasted longer than it did. But it didn’t. The hostess – I think she introduced herself as Stephanie – stepped in and escorted me out of the moment.

From what I gathered by following her to “thirty-one”, her job is to walk ahead of patrons while wearing outrageously tight pants, arrive at a table, and then stand at that table until everyone (who just realized they could make out the topography of her leg moles through the Lycra) sits down in the nearest wicker basket.

If the phone rings, she probably answers it, though I have no evidence. Other than that, I don’t think she has any further duties. If I had to guess, I would say her previous job was prostitution and she hasn’t had this one very long.

She spends the majority of her shift greeting people from behind a lectern, directly below my table (right beside the kitchen), but she left her post a minute ago. She went outside, found a patch of sidewalk right in front of my car (potentially blocking my exit strategy), and started a phase of heavy breathing. At first, she just stood there, all erect, looking upward. But then she bent forward like a 7th inning outfielder with her hands on her knees. And that’s the position she’s been in ever since. What I find most unusual is that her pants actually allow her into that posture without exploding.

Okay, never mind, she isn’t interesting anymore. Well, she is. But she’s not as interesting as this:

I'm watching the yeast biscuit chef hobble up the stairs with a heap of steaming biology on a platter. It looks like something the Cro-Magnon busboy killed near his rock shelter habitat in the Paleolithic era.

...

Oh my god, it's for me.

I didn't even order anything. Nobody has said a word to me since Stephanie left. I don't even have water.

...

What the fuck? He just put it on my table. And because I'm sitting alone at a table for two, it actually accommodates it.

And I still can't identify the smell, which is almost as discouraging as this whole episode is confusing. Obviously I've identified that it's coming off of this giant hunk of thing, but I have no idea what it is.

Or why it's in front of me (which is slightly more terrifying).

Or, perhaps most terrifying, why the biscuit chef is still standing here, hovering over me, wearing a new, less ambiguous expression which reveals to me that he's expecting something.

It feels like an unusual time to pay though, so I'm not quite sure what to give him. "Thank you" seems like too much.

Especially now that I'm actually inspecting what I've been served.

It's very obviously meat. So, from that, I can deduce that there was once a time in which it was alive. And then there was a time in which it wasn't anymore.

I know we're in the second phase, but I have no idea when the transition took place. I'm inclined to think either just now or a very long time ago.

As a retrospective qualifier to my self-congratulating statement about "I'm good at judging age", my abilities only apply to recognizable species.

The creature in front of me looks like a medium-sized Boston terrier with horse legs. But a very sedentary horse that's also a little bit underfed. Given the torso-to-leg dimensions, its gait would probably resemble a spider's. So even if it were alive, prancing in a meadow somewhere, the sight of it would very likely frighten me. As is, I'm frightened in a different way.

Holes have been bored through its ribs – I assume to replace the viscera with stuffing – though there’s no amount of culinary counterfeiting one could do to pass this off as a Thanksgiving entrée.

Maybe the stuffing is what smells so damn bad.

I guess it doesn’t smell any worse while it’s sitting in front of me than it did while it was wafting up from the kitchen. If anything can be labeled good news in all of this, that’s probably it.

By the time Stephanie had gone outside to breathe the air around my car, the molecules of my potentially stuffed spidery dog meat had already finished penetrating my bones. And the nerves responsible for every sense I have had already begun deadening themselves as a biological coping mechanism.

Sorry, back to the thing in front of me:

It’s lying on its back and there’s a burnt rock wall belay rope synched around its still-hairy ankles like a noose. A really snug noose, which is mashing together its cloven hooves like how a frustrated eight year old forces together mismatched puzzle pieces (that one day when I was really upset because my brother wouldn’t let me play with his Lincoln Logs).

Its head is actually attached and hanging off one end of the platter, and then, beyond the platter, off the table completely. If I had a date, its mouth would be in her lap.

Just barely inside its mouth, the creature’s teeth seem to be succumbing to gravity more than any other part of it. They look like giant auburn hooves reaching for the ground with all their might.

It looks amazingly dead.

Hanging off the other end of the platter, aimed just to my right, is what I assume must be the rump roast. And in the middle of this rump is a mostly-roasted, really nappy tail. Several tufts of hair appear as if never exposed to heat, like the frozen inside of a charcoaled hotdog. Except hairy.

I’m trying to figure out what the most appropriate move for me is right now, but biscuit chef is still hovering over me with his “I’m expecting something; please provide” face.

I’m not sure I have the language skills to describe how uncomfortable this makes me. But I also don’t know the ritual any of this belongs to. I’ve never been here before, so it could very well just be a misunderstanding on my behalf; me having found myself out of touch with something customary.

It feels a lot worse than that, but it's probably still appropriate for me to at least extend basic manners (knowing luxury should always be welcoming of the coal miner no matter how unhygienic his shift was).

In this case, me upholding manners equates to me picking at the hide.

...

I decided the left side of it, half way between the tail and the rib hole, was the least uninviting patch of creature. The least amount of excitement is happening there. So that's where I aimed my fork.

But I didn't jab it in with any amount of dignity. Before any fork prong even penetrated the aura around the creature, I had already turned my head away with the expectation that it would either spasm or burst in blood.

It didn't do either.

I almost wish it had because now my fork is loaded and I'm sure biscuit chef has noticed that I'm not speeding it to my mouth.

I just... I need a minute. I would prefer that minute to be spent outside, mimicking Stephanie's outfielder posture.

I think – if I were allowed to do that – it would help me ingest the situation before any attempt to ingest what's on my fork. And that strikes me as a very necessary first step. But I don't think I'll be granted that step.

I realize I'm just stalling with these thoughts, but this whole thing is starting to feel like my seventh grade attempt at oral sex.

I found myself in the position *somewhat* involuntarily, and, though I was aware of the rules that placed the (we'll call it mutton) before me, I was nowhere near ready to begin. In both cases, the mutton has been much more eager than its diner.

Okay, fork. I'm done stalling. I'm ready. Let's do this...

...

And now chewing (clearly I'm talking strictly about the restaurant experience).

...

Holy Christ this is bad. I don't think I can swallow.

I can't. I don't even think I can chew. But he's fucking looking at me. Biscuit chef is. Hold on. I can't do this.

I'm going to pretend like I swallowed it. I'm just going to tuck it in the back of my mouth, where my cheek meets my throat, do my best not to gag, and smile at biscuit chef as an effort to substitute genuine disgust with proper courtesy. Then I can wipe my mouth out with my napkin. And the napkins from all of the other tables.

Okay... and... begin.

...

There. Done.

Or close to done. I did the best I could.

And now I'm looking at something I didn't expect. The chef is giving me a different kind of smile. An unmistakably complete one, as if substituting humility with the culmination of revenge.

I don't understand this at all. He just left. I'm watching him hobble back down the stairs toward the kitchen.

I think... I don't know. I don't know what to think. I don't get what just happened. Except that I'm realizing the contortion of my face, as it restrained disgust for manners, was the exact expression the chef gave me following my "I like your hat" comment.

I don't know if he did that on purpose though. It seems way too calculated to be feasible. But the smile he exchanged for mine looked like any face would while mid-reception of the deepest compliment.

I'm not eating any more of this until I figure out what just happened.

Or, I guess more accurately, I'm not eating any more of this ever as long as I'm alive and capable of making independent decisions.

I already swallowed the last bite on accident while I was confused (and distracted by that confusion).

I'm going to the bathroom.

As far as I know, my bowels and bladder are fine. I don't think that one bite did me in. I just want to lean over the sink and splash water in my face like a Chinese woman. And then, as soon as I'm feeling wet and composed enough, I'll try to recreate the series of expressions.

In case I ever want to tell the story properly, I'm going to need to understand what actually happened to me first. And to do that, I think I have to be able to string the faces together in the right sequence. I might not be thinking very clearly right now, but I'm pretty sure that's where the narrative is.

Okay, I'm on my way. I left twenty dollars on the table. That should be enough.

I took one bite of something I didn't order, so if that's not enough, I'm not interested in honoring any customs that suggest more would be.

...

Okay, I just left the bathroom.

I smiled at myself in the mirror for ten minutes. I figured out nothing. What happened to me makes no more sense than it did before my face was fatigued. So I'm beginning to submit to the idea that I'll never be able to tell the story properly.

Though I'm looking at my table (thirty-one) and it's empty. At least empty of the animal that was on it when I left. The twenty dollars is still there.

Maybe they saw me go into the bathroom, noticed how long I was in there, assumed that time was spent throwing up, and felt bad for me. And this is my instant rebate, paid for in guilt.

I doubt it.

And I'm not even barely tempted to go take my money back.

Something else weird would happen to me.

If I had actually finished working out my pre-meal escape plan, maybe I wouldn't have been subjected to any of this in the first place. I wouldn't feel violated right now in a way that I don't understand. Plus, I wouldn't be currently slipping down the stairs trying to get out.

I find it interesting that they didn't mop up the puddles, which must have poured from the creature's gaping mouth on the way up. If not for liability, at least for the smell.

Also interesting that neither Stephanie nor the biscuit chef is anywhere to be seen. You'd think at least one of them would be standing where they first greeted me, bon voyaging me to my impending diarrhea.

Maybe they're both in the back, salvaging my meal for a future victim. It might be a two person job, stretching an undersized slice of Saran Wrap over its hooves like a cleft palate smile trying to close on buck teeth.

No last wave, no farewell, no sign of them anywhere. Though there is a note fastened to my windshield with the wiper.

And a small puddle of vomit in front of my car. But the note is more interesting.

It's on the back of a receipt that says "nativity." I can only assume that's what they call my dish. The one I didn't order, but was served.

On the other side, written with a pen that didn't actually release any ink – it just carved some indentations into it – is the word "sorry" (the only reason I could make out that word is because I was looking for it) and what appears to be a fourteen digit phone number, of which four digits I can make out. I could be reading the whole thing wrong.

I'm going home.