

The screaming of birds out the window woke John up a few minutes before his alarm, causing him to groan his irritation. Ten minutes left was not long enough for him to fall back asleep before it was time for him to get up for his shift. And as tight as he left things already, there was no point in trying, using the extra few minutes to browse on his phone, though not finding anything of note. Save the usual political crap, things seemingly worse every day and leaving him wondering why he ever bothered. At least his own life in his small town was in order, and as long as he stayed here in the summer, it felt like he could leave the rest of the world behind.

As much as John hated the early shift, and working at his local fast food joint beside, he'd held the job in some capacity since he was sixteen, more than ten years ago. Having little ambition and unsure of what direction to take his life, he'd spent the first few years working there out of high school, at least consistent employment, if not very lucrative. It was enough for him to save for college, and now he was three years into his computer programming degree. Still, he home each summer to stay with his parents and picked up with shifts he could to keep his merger savings afloat.

Not for the first time, a side view glance in the mirror made him lament his chubby physique, jiggling a little as he walked. John was always on the heavy side, not helped by the fact that he led a sedentary lifestyle on his computer, only leaving for work or to see his girlfriend. That, combined with how much he ate from his fast food job contributed to his less-than-desirable weight. However, with going to college, he had the desire to do something about it. Still, there was little free time for such during his studies, as much as he wished. And his plans to eat better and work out were thrown out the window the moment he tried his favorite fast food dishes from the local diner once more.

His weight hadn't been too much of an issue in her personal life, at least. His girlfriend didn't mind, always having been on the heavier side as well. It was never a hindrance to their relationship, having been together since high school. Their similar interests in games and media kept them together, and the two of them eventually hoped to move out of town and get married once John had finished his degree. Such had been something stable for him all his adult life, and their relationship was something he always found himself thankful for.

Heading downstairs, his mother greeted him with a pleasant good morning, having breakfast on the table. In truth, she doted on him too much, their family having moved from Puerto Rico more than ten years ago, wanting a better life for their son. As an only child, they tended to spoil him quite a bit, something John immediately took advantage of. Still, both his parents loved him dearly, and leaving them for school was one of the things he truly missed.

Replying with a good morning of his own, John sat down for breakfast, eating quickly to make sure he had time to get to work. He had been a little late the past few days, and while he wouldn't be fired for it outright, he thought it better to be on his boss's good side. The man was a neighbor of theirs, and treated John well, often giving him free meals and the like. John, if he was being honest with himself, was always a little lazy, but he didn't want to take the man's generosity for granted, feeling a little guilty as of late for his sloth.

Sending a text to Layne, wishing her good morning, her response of a heart made him smile, even after all their years together. He was looking forward to being off shift later when the two of them would play a new online game together. It would be a long shift, but in the end to get to play with her, and that was an insensitive to get through it quickly.

Work started as normal, a little slow and tedious to prepare the store for opening. Setting booths up, peeling potatoes, washing dishes, and the like were all part of his chores. Not that John usually minded, lazy in general but still eager to help out where he could. It didn't help that he was naturally easily distracted and forgot things easily, even after the ten years he'd worked here. But he was certainly earnest, and got along with his boss Bill, for the most part, and was satisfied when his boss was satisfied, even if he had to try especially hard to make sure he kept up to task.

With the size of the town he lived in, there were few staff working, and many of the cleaning, serving, and prep tasks fell on him, while his boss took care of cooking and operating the fryers. Not the most social of people, John had to train himself to make small talk, eased by the fact that most people knew him. It had been embarrassing his first few years, having come from so far away and trying to fit into a close-knit town. Eventually, he'd come to be accepted, and seen as a staple in the restaurant, and he was able to interact with customers as much as was necessary to do his job, even if he was sometimes awkward.

His first two customers were two middle-aged women he reconized came here about once or twice a week for lunch. Much to his chagrin, they were the type to come out to gossip loudly as much as John was able to overhear. Most of the town gossip didn't appeal to him, and he largely let their talk go in one ear and out the other, so to speak. Today was no different, John taking their order and waiting a few minutes for Bill to prepare it, with no other customers to wait on, and all his prep and cleaning finished already. When it was ready, he moved to take the trays to their table, the two of them sipping sodas and lost in their conversation. Yet, the moment he approached, one of the women turned to thank him, before an odd expression crossed her features and she let out a rather large belch right in his face. John was a little bit taken aback, not exactly disgusted, per se, but rather perplexed by the sudden and somewhat rude outburst. But it was the fact that she didn't even bother to excuse herself, rather went back to talking to her friend as though nothing had happened.

Thinking it weird, John decided to head to the back, figuring they didn't need anything from him at the moment. Yet, no sooner had he turned around than the sound of a high-pitched fart hit his ears, followed by a rather abhorrent odor. More akin to a barn than anything that should have come out of a middle-aged woman, John found himself moving quickly to the back, not sure what the woman could have eaten but not wanting to know. It was beyond rude, but something about the situation didn't sit right with him. The other woman with her didn't seem to react to the sound or smell, and much as it bothered John. Maybe her senses were dulled with age? But with the dozen or so other tasks John had to tend to that day, he was at least somewhat able to put it out of his mind

Yet, the longer the day went on, John found he was starting to become plagued with a pain in his own guts, one that came with a bit of belching itself. Working by himself in the dish area, he was able to mute the sounds and save himself the embarrassment. Soon, the ache in his guts grew so heavy that he couldn't hold in a fart of his own, one that smelled more like the woman's than he wanted to admit. At least he was able to hide it, but there was no denying the relief it caused, John was thankful that he felt better. Maybe there was something in the water that was causing their flatulence to smell so bad? Or, simply a coincidence?

As his shift continued, John found such was harder to deny. The sound of belching was more frequent than he was comfortable with, and more than once he got a whiff of those same rancid farts, something that shouldn't normally come out of a person. John's own farts were rather pungent as well, but at least not as bad to his nose as those of his customers. He was tempted to ask his boss about it, though the same stinky gas around the man made John thought better of it. It could have been the food, though surely his boss would have said something about it, right?

John did his best to ignore it as he made his way back home, hoping that it was a one-off event and wishing he could rid his nose of the smell. Much to his shame, he was starting to get used to it, the stink of a barn something that had no place in his restaurant but seemed to linger there as the day went on. Even the customers that hadn't yet eaten seemed gassy, leaving John no clue as to where it was coming from. He couldn't think of anything he had eaten to make his guts churn like that, much less something that would have affected everyone to come into their restaurant. In the end, with nothing he could do about it, John decided to put it from his mind and go home to dinner, finding despite his gut pain in was actually starving.

Yet, the moment he sat that, that same cloud of stink came over him, his father having farted as nonchalantly as anyone he had seen today. Any other time, he was sure his mother would chastise him for it, but the occasional belch from her lips seemed to denote the same lack of concern. Eventually, with the smell in such close quarters, John found he needed to excuse

himself, unable to stomach it and needing a reprieve. What the hell was up with everyone today? Was it really the entire town that was affected by a stomach bug and a lack of manners? Or was it something more?

Eventually logging on to game with his girlfriend, it was everything he could do not to call her out for her own bout of belching. He couldn't hear her farts, though there was every chance she was just as gassy as everyone else he met. John, for his part, was able to repress the urge to belch, though his stomach hurt fiercely if he resisted the urge to fart. Even using the bathroom wasn't enough to stem the discomfort, as though something in his gut fauna had been disrupted. Asking Layne if she noticed anything off today, she simply replied with a no, asking him why he seemed so concerned. John wanted to protest, though in the end did his best to repress his stubborn streak. It seemed highly likely that no matter what he tried to say, she didn't seem to get it, and didn't want to get into a fight over his frustration. And soon enough, it was time for bed, as much as John was frustrated with the whole affair.

Sleep was precarious at best, not only from the smells his body made against his better inclinations. It troubled him to think that he was in a dream of sorts rather than the natural world as he'd come to understand it. He couldn't put it out of his mind how everyone's manners seemed to have been thrown out the window, so to speak. Everyone was acting like their actions were just...normal. No matter how much John tried to rationalize things, he couldn't wrap his head around it. All he could do was to hope that it had been an imagining of sorts, and that the world would return to a sense of normalcy by morning.

Yet, much to his chagrin, that was not to be the case. The first thing John noticed when he woke up was that his belly seemed even more bloated than the gas imbalance could have accounted for. While already chubbier than he was comfortable with, seemed even more distended as much as he could tell as he tried to don a shirt with little success. It had been a long time since he had used a scale and figured such would make him feel worse than it might have otherwise. At least he didn't have to go to work right away, but the fact that he was stuck in the kitchen with his gassy parents was not something welcome. Noting had changed since last night, his father belching before bidding him good morning, and the stench of flatulence stinging his nose as he got down to eat. Strangely, he didn't seem to have much of an appetite, though he couldn't be sure if it was from the frequent stink or something tasting off about his bacon and eggs. Either way, he was left to put most of his food in the garbage, starving but not able to eat what was on his plate.

Taking his coffee and turning on the news, John found himself following, a certain curiosity making him wonder if there would be any reports about a stomach bug that might explain the strange bodily functions. Nothing he knew of would excuse the lack of manners unless everyone was simply comfortable with them that they didn't require further comment.

Still, it was a little surprising to notice that even the news anchors were belching frequently, and the sounds of distant farts picked up on camera were ignored with whatever local fair they were reported on. It was not just those in John's circle that seemed affected, but those in the town at large. And this was only the local news...

With no one else finding any fault in their lack of manner or the smells coming out of their backsides, John figured there was nothing else he could do but go to work. Questioning his parents about it gave confused stares, looks of introspection crossing their faces for only a brief moment before going back to what they were doing. Feeling a little shy as he was, John didn't want to make waves. However, he couldn't help but fixate on the reality that he might be the only one who legitimately found something off about their bodily functions. And that, more than anything else, gave him cause for alarm, even if there was nothing he could do to act on it.

Getting to work, the first thing his boss did after saying good morning was turn around and let loose a rather disgusting fart, perhaps even more rancid than anything he had smelled before. John couldn't help but let out a "What the hell?" which was met with a look of confusion and slight irritation. It was obvious he had no idea what John was talking about, and John left it there, at least able to breathe as he moved away to start with the morning dishes.

The almost animalistic scents of flatulence were present as restaurant customers came and went, though even with their potency, John was thankfully starting to get used to it once more. He did his best, no one else seeming to be bothered by how gassy they were, or the frequent belches that dotted their speech. It was beyond bizarre, John wondering if he was part of some dream or was otherwise imagining things. The dissonance between his perception and reality was beyond his ability to register, and the best he could do was focus his attention on something else, anything else, and get through the day without taking much of a headache.

That was hardly the only thing to confuse him as the day went on. Orders of burgers and the like were common, though John couldn't help but notice the sour faces on some of the diners as they ate. It was as though the meat was tainted, some people either spat in their napkins or picked off lettuce and tomatoes and ate only those. One of the customers even yelled at him, pissed off for the poor quality of the meat and demanding a free salad. Taking the request to his boss, Bill only shrugged, telling him to make one with a distant look of confusion on his face. John did as told, not really caring about the loss in earnings. Still, he figured it was best to avoid taking his usual lunch of a burger himself, just to be on the safe side.

Normally, John would be allowed to go home in the afternoon, the crowds dying down and his boss taking over until the supper rush came in. But for some reason, the restaurant was full this afternoon, even some repeat customers coming in and asking for the same custom salads they had eaten earlier. Fewer and fewer people were asking for burgers and the few who did

demand something else in its place. The next time John went to inform his boss about the state of the burgers, Bill gave him a disgusted look. “Why would we even sell something so gross?” Bill asked, moving to the freezer and looking at all the preweighted frozen beef. With a look of repulsion, Bill asked John to throw it out, and between serving customers and taking their complaints to the owner.

Even John found that the smell of the last few burgers he’d brought out smelled a little off to his nose, making him feel a little sick to his stomach. He couldn’t imagine the meat would go bad so soon since they had gotten their order several days ago and had been serving burgers successfully up until yesterday. There had to be something in the water that was making everyone sick, but then why was no one else talking about it? It was like everyone’s head was in the clouds, so to speak, and anywhere he looked, the same confused expressions on everyone’s faces made him wonder why he was the only outlier. Nothing he could think of could explain what the hell was going on, as much as it was starting to frustrate him.

Getting home late, a text from Layne, which usually excited him, made him irritated, knowing she was in much the same state as the rest of the town. She wanted him to come over, something that usually lead to some welcome sex. But given his repulsion over the smells he had to deal with all day, John opted not to, citing feeling sick as the reason. Layne was, of course, more than understanding, wishing him to feel better and offering to be there for him if he needed her. John felt nothing but love and gratitude for her, though with everything going on at large, it was hard to focus on anything else. That, and the scents wafting from her changing body would surely be as unpalatable as the ones he’d had to contend with all day. It was bad enough he had to deal with his own regular flatulence or the frequent belching that made his ire grow. At least he had some time alone to try to decompress, but it was a brief respite in the grander scheme of things.

The persistent feeling of bloating annoyed him as he went to bed, and it seemed only to get worse as he woke up the next day. His belly seemed even further distended, enough that his shirt rode up an inch more than he was comfortable with. Surely he shouldn’t have been more than even what his overweight stature could equate. Even using the bathroom, something that took longer and several more flushes than he was used to, could not alleviate it. It was as though something was fundamentally wrong with his insides, and no amount of gas from either end could manage to clear it.

Met with the same consistent belching and flatulence from his family, John was hardly aware of anything else being off, at least at first. Part of him was inclined to check his parents to see if their own bellies were distended from what he was used to seeing. He didn’t think it would be evident if he hadn’t been paying close attention over the past few months, and at first glance, there was little he could see that was out of the ordinary. His mother seemed a little concerned

and went to ask him if anything was wrong when John's eyes went wide. It seemed that her ears, while never anything he had focused on before, drew his gaze as they started to move out of reflex. It didn't seem as though his mother was conscious of them, though they were clearly twitching somewhat regularly, as though reacting to sounds that John couldn't pick up himself. It was all he could do to look away as she asked him if he was OK, assuring her he was fine and just spacing out for a little bit.

Getting ready to head out for his shift, John took much more time than usual to check his body for anything similar wrong with himself. His ears, as best he could tell, were still human-shaped, and other than the bloating in his guts, there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary. Yet, with how nonchalant his parents and the rest of the town seemed to be over the changes thus far, John couldn't deny the possibility that somehow he might not be aware of any changes from how he once appeared. It was a little jarring to think of, but there was no denying the possibility, as much as he was learning to open himself to in the past couple of days.

Work was the same as it had been the past couple of days, the stink of gassiness hanging like a miasma over the restaurant and making John wonder how everyone was able to stand it. It was becoming so unbearable that he had to breathe through his nose, leaving his boss to ask him what was wrong. It was almost as though his outburst the other day was forgotten, as though Bill couldn't recall what had been bothering him. Hell, it was almost as though he couldn't even comprehend what might be wrong, leaving John to have to hide his frustrations. It was certainly becoming trying, but there was nothing he could do but work his shift and hope things got better, not worse.

That was not to be the case as he took orders, did dishes, and dealt with the same rather obscene number of customers as they'd had the other day. No one bothered to order burgers anymore, or in fact any meat, including chicken and seafood. It was a little bizarre, as though not only did they have no way to know their freezers had been emptied of meat, but it didn't even seem to occur to anyone that beef was an option. John was somewhat thankful for that, given he didn't think he could stomach even the scent of cooked meat today. Any memories he had of enjoying it made his stomach roil, and he almost craved the same types of salads that everyone was ordering. He figured he could at least settle for some fries, the sight and smell not too offensive. It was strange since he loved the food there so much, but it didn't bother him to throw out the remaining frozen meat if they tasted as bad as John thought they might!

Reminded of his mother's ears, John kept his eyes out for similar odd traits as he scanned the room of diners. Sure enough, several seemed to sport the same sorts of pointed ears, stretched slightly to the sides of their heads and twitching ever so slightly as though trying to listen to other conversations. John tried his best not to stare and attract attention, but it was hard when people's ears looked so out of place for what he was used to. Stranger still, many people were

wearing clothes that were a little too small for them, showing off guts that were becoming as bulbous as John's own overweight belly. A few people seemed uncomfortable in their shoes as well, as though their toes were too big to fit in them. Hell, John was almost sure he saw something twitching in the back of one guy's back, and for a moment worried the flatulence had come with some unwanted incontinence. Thankfully, that didn't seem to be the case, though John was left to wonder what he was looking at. Surely, it had to do with the bizarre alterations and behaviors he'd observed thus far, but what the hell was the end game?

One thing was starting to become clear as the lunch crowd came through and John had to run plate after plate of greens to the gassy and bloated customers. With everyone seeming to be ordering from their vegetarian menu, they were quickly running out of supplies, and Bill, seemingly rather confused, called one of his relatives to make a grocery run. The notion seemed to truly perplex the man, as though throwing out all their ordered meat wouldn't be a shortage of anything else. He even made the comment about having just ordered a delivery a few days ago, confused they would be out already. John went to comment, though Bill only shrugged, that faraway look in his eyes a sign that he was having a harder time rationalizing between what he thought was real and what John knew was objectively true. It was almost enough to make John wonder if his own perception of reality was somewhat tainted and if it was he who saw everything as wrong, rather than the rest of the world. It was easy to think that, in any case!

It seemed the biggest shock of the day was yet to come as John moved to one of the last tables from the dinner rush, a pair of middle-aged women sipping coffee and chatting about something John couldn't quite make out. One of them had the same twitching ears that John had come to see on several of the guests at this point, but that was hardly the worst of it. John was not in time to escape smelling a rather rancid fart, followed by the woman standing up, as though she figured it was a prelude to what was to come. Yet, instead of making her way to the bathroom, as John might have expected, she proceeded to pull her pants off right there, asshole exposed and making John reflexively look away. The reality of what she was doing left him confused for a moment until the stench hit his nose. John couldn't look away as the woman proceeded to defecate right there in front of them, her waste falling on the chair and the floor as she only grunted slightly as she did so. John wanted to yell at her in disgust, yet, it seemed the woman with her saw nothing wrong in the act, not even stopping the story she was telling as her friend emptied her bowels in the middle of the restaurant.

Backing away from the stench, more akin to manure than anything, John made his way to the back, trying to figure out the best way to tell his boss. Rather than find the action odd, Bill went to give him a shovel, asking him to clean it up as though he would any other mess. John was aghast at the notion, though given how callous Bill seemed to be about the whole affair, he didn't think there was any point in trying to argue. It was beyond disgusting, the stench awful and the quantity more like manure than anything he'd seen coming out of a human. And he had

to clean it up, throwing it into a pail and into the dump behind back, before getting down and scrubbing until his sense of smell was all but gone. He couldn't believe what the hell was going on, more pissed off when Bill seemed annoyed with him for taking too long. How long was it supposed to take to clean up someone's literal shit off the floor, anyway!?

The end of his shift could not come soon enough, John walked home with disgust, body sore and reeking with shit. It was all he could do to get out of there, and hope the action was a one off thing and not indicative of what his town would find acceptable at large. Hell, had everyone not been so undisturbed by the act, the smell, or the unsanitary nature, John would have told her to get the hell out of the store. Yet, such would have made him the odd one out and might have gotten him fired for it. What the hell was wrong with the world?!
