

The Forty Percent Genius

He hung up the phone with his wife. She had been elated at the news. He would be awarded the Copley Medal for his research in CRISPR-Cas9 and its implications for neurodegenerative disease. There was even talk of a Nobel. The recognition had come after decades of work and it would be the culmination of a lifetime of sacrifice by them both.

She had asked him to pick up a bottle of champagne on his way home. They would celebrate. He boarded the bus that he took every day to and from the lab. The familiar smells of sweat and urine permeated the bus. He got a seat near the front. That was almost never empty.

The bus was headed for the liquor store in the strip mall down the street from his home. He had never liked driving. The bus driver knew the streets and the traffic laws. He would rely on that. His stop loomed in the front window of the bus. He pulled the cord, indicating his wish to disembark.

At the liquor store he headed for the wine section. Not knowing which wines were champagne and which were not, he asked the gentleman stacking bottles for some help.

“Hi. I need a bottle of champagne.”

The young man placed the last bottle on the shelf and looked at the aging scientist. "Do you want sparkling wine, or the real thing?"

"Umm ..." The winner of the Copley Medal stroked his ample graying beard. "She said champagne."

"Well there are several very good sparkling wines that don't come with the price tag of champagne. We have some excellent California varietals."

"Umm ..." The older man was lost. "How about that one?" He pointed to a bottle with a pony on the label.

"Actually, that's a Pinot. It's a decent wine but doesn't have the bubbles you might desire..."

"OK, can you just pick one?"

The young man stood back and scanned his inventory. He reached up and pulled a large bulbous bottle from the shelf. "Here. This one is quite tasty and it's not too expensive."

The scientist expressed his gratitude and headed for the register to pay. The woman from behind the counter was looking at her phone. He had to get her attention. He coughed.

"Just one bottle?" The young lady snapped her bubble gum as she started to ring up the order.

"Yes."

"That'll be \$19.85."

The gentleman rummaged through his raincoat and pants looking for his wallet. He finally happened upon it in the

inside pocket of the raincoat. He opened the leather money container and leafed through the expired coupons and bits of paper layered inside the pouch to find his credit card. He placed the card in the side slot of the credit card reader and swiped.

“That’s a chip card.” The woman seemed exasperated at the man’s seeming incompetence. “You have to insert it in the bottom slot.”

The older man placed his credit card in the bottom slot. The lady sighed the sigh of one completely unhappy with their job.

“The other way.” When he had trouble she offered, “The other, other way.”

The chip card finally engaged properly the computers whizzed and buzzed to exchange some of his money at his bank into the bank that the liquor store used to store their cash. The machine started to beep. The older scientist looked confused.

“You can remove it now.” The young woman rolled her eyes.

Grabbing his wine and his credit card, the scientist walked the rest of the way home. He was still beaming from the exciting news about the Copley. He could not wait to share the moment with his wife. She had been his constant support over the years, and they needed to commemorate this achievement. It had been won with a lot of sweat and surrender of the more frivolous things of life.

The older man fumbled with his keys as he approached the front door of his home. Finding the brass key that fit the lock of his house, he pushed and turned. The front door locked at the turning. He grabbed the knob and turned. The door wouldn't open, it was locked, of course.

Looking confused again, he tried his key again. This time he turned the key in the opposite direction. Success! Opening the front door, he heard his wife calling from the kitchen. "Dinner's almost ready!"

He made his way to the back of the house and pulled forth his bottle from its brown paper bag that the liquor store had provided. "I got the champagne."

"Oh good! Why don't you open it; I'll get the lamb on the table."

He ventured into the dining room and opened the top drawer of the china cabinet where they kept the corkscrew. He put the sharp end of the screw on top of the bottle of sparkling wine and began the twisting motion that would have been important in removing a cork. This bottle, however, had one of those plastic tops that you must remove by hand. The corkscrew was not needed.

Onward he endeavored. The screw was penetrating the plastic top all right, but when he tried to pull the 'cork' out of the bottle the screw came out empty. All that remained to attest to the procedure recently completed was a hole in the plastic top.

He looked at the bottle. An idea presented itself. He took the bottle down to the workbench in the basement. He

levered the bottle between two cardboard boxes of various and sundry and using a hammer began to lightly ping the top of the bottle. His aim was to loosen the top to make it easier to remove.

He pinged once too many times and the top of the bottle cracked and exploded as the pressure inside the bottle was great. It had been made greater by the pinging of the hammer. The bottle produced a fountain of bubbles that shot high in the air. When the shower of wine was completed, all he had left was a broken bottle half full of wine.

Another idea hatched in that magnificent brain of his and he visited the kitchen to implement the project. He searched the cabinets for a large measuring cup that had a lip for pouring and a rusty metal strainer.

“What’cha doin’ there?” His wife was curious at his choice of kitchenware.

“Just opening the wine.”

Back in the basement again, he poured what was left of the wine from the bottle through the strainer and into the measuring cup. What had begun as light-yellow wine of excellent quality was now a slightly orange liquid, having been tainted by the rust in the strainer.

He returned to the dining room to find his wife just finishing setting the table with her fine china and silver. A carving platter lay in the middle of the table beside the lighted candles. A perfectly roasted leg of lamb rested in the middle of the platter with assorted roasted root vegetables adorning the ring of the carving board.

He put the two glasses he had procured from the kitchen on the table. They were the glasses his kids had used in their youth. He set the one with Wilma Flintstone in front of his wife's place setting. Barney Rubble was placed by his. He poured the wine.

His wife raised her glass for a toast. "To your recent success and the successes to come. May your best days be in front of you!"

He picked up his glass and raised it to his lips. But before tasting, he responded. "None of this would have been possible without you, dear."

They drank. She quickly placed her beverage back on the table. He squinted and held the glass to the light. It tasted somewhat livery. 'Oh well.' What did he know about wine anyway?

She decided to start the small talk. "I heard on the radio that people are spending almost forty percent of their working lives at work. It's up from thirty-six just ten years ago."

"Hmmm ... That seems low to me."

"It does somehow. I guess they must include sleep time there?"

"Who has time to sleep?" They both laughed.

He carved and they ate. He drained the last of his wine and poured another draught. "Some more for you?" He raised his eyebrows as he tempted his bride with another glass of the bubbly.

She put her hand over her glass. "None for me, thanks." She went back to eating. Eventually she gave the excuse. "I still have work to do later."

He nodded in agreement. "I have a grant application to go over myself."

The meal over, he offered to help clean up. "Let me wash those honey."

She immediately grabbed the dishes he was trying to pick up. "No dear! I will do it."

He went to his study. She breathed a sigh of relief. Those were her mother's dishes.

