

Dismally, Tom stared down at his phone, and the 59% *F* next to his ECON 101 quiz. He trudged along the strip-mall sidewalk, the colorful fronts of the fast-food joints flashing by him like clowns in a bad dream. Tom picked a restaurant at random, shoving his way inside with his eyes glued gloomily to his lowered GPA.

No one was in line, and Tom felt a pang of sad satisfaction. There was just enough time to grab lunch, mope for twenty-five point seven minutes, and make it to his American History class back on campus.

Sidling up to the cash register, Tom refused to make eye contact. *Behold a ruined man*, he thought inwardly. Tom said, "Hullo."

"Hello, sir," said a perky worker of the female persuasion. "What can I get you?"

"Uh, just a cheeseburger and a drink please." *And perhaps a plane ticket back to Iowa. Scholarships be hanged.*

"Excuse me?"

Tom looked up. "Cheeseburger."

The worker had freckles, a pert nose and a puzzled expression. The girl's visor was tipped high on her forehead as she said slowly, "Cheese...burger...?"

"Yeah."

The corners of her mouth twitched. Tom, despite his academic dejection, had to admit it was a nice mouth. Even if the owner was weird.

"Ketchup or mustard?"

"Uh, both?"

"Coke or Pepsi?" she said crisply, that mutinous twitching continuing.

"Dew."

"Seeded bun or seedless?"

At this, Tom looked up from his phone into a pair of innocent green eyes. Green like lettuce.

"Uh, whatever?"

"Vegan beef or murdered beef?"

"One that had a good life, I guess...?"

"Romaine or iceberg?"

"Seriously, I don't care." Tom spread his hands helplessly. "I just want a burger."

"Boxers or briefs?"

“Excuse me?” Tom shoved his phone in his pocket, Econ 101 utterly forgotten.

The twitching around her lips had turned chronic. “Long walk on the beach or movies and popcorn?”

“Look, uh...” Tom read her name tag. “Trisha, I just want a burger!”

“Literate or illiterate?” The crazed fast-food worker was openly grinning now.

“I can read!” Tom said, feeling irrationally emasculated.

“The menu?”

“Of course!” Tom looked at the menu. “See?! Flavors: Rocky Road, Chocolate Mint Chip, Cookie Dough...”

There was a long, fat, telling pause.

Trisha smiled good-naturedly. “One scoop or two, sir?”

In a rosy daze of embarrassment, Tom chose at random. When handed his ice cream cone, Tom looked up at Trisha again.

“Anything else I can do for you, sir?”

Tom smiled crookedly. “Know how to fix an Econ grade?”

“Econ last winter was the longest three months of my life,” said Trisha, handing him the receipt. “Have a nice day.”

Tom stared at Trisha nervously, stuffing the receipt into his pants. “Could I buy you a cone, Trisha?”

Trisha glanced at her watch, flipped her ponytail over her shoulder and asked, straight-faced, “One scoop or two?”

Tom smiled. “Two.”