

## Friendly Burger

Being alone is something you get used to if it's something that happens long enough. It's different from being lonely because it just becomes a fact, a simple part of life like the sun rising in the day and setting at night. If you're always on the road like me, I guarantee that you would concur.

I'm having these thoughts one night while I'm driving. It's a quiet night. I'm just taking a highway through a forest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The area is snowy and secluded, and the only sounds I can hear are the heat blasting, the music on the radio humming, and my stomach rumbling.

Goddammit, I'm hungry. But, judging by where I am, there wouldn't be any place to stop within miles. I figure I could keep chugging along, suppressing my stomach pains until-

The music comes to a stop as it's slowly taken over by static, followed by a man's voice, "Hey there, folks! Sorry to interrupt the tunes, but I gotta tell ya the winter weather is only gonna get worse. So, I'd recommend finding a hotel for the night real soon, or take some shelter wherever ya can."

*Shit, I think, I'm in the middle of nowhere. How am I gonna find anywhere to stay-*

"And I know what you're thinkin'! 'I'm in the middle of nowhere! How am I gonna find a place to stay?' Well, don't ya worry! You can find a motel and bar about 25 miles north, or take a right at the next exit for a delicious meal... and maybe some company!" The voice savors those final words, making an awkward pause. "But, anyway, enjoy your music, and we'll talk real soon!" The voice transfers back into static, and finally to the classic rock that was playing minutes before.

Hell yeah. A restaurant. A place where I can stretch my legs and get some grub! My mouth begins to water at just the thought of the chunks of a juicy cheeseburger dancing on my taste buds, inviting me for more. Despite my desperate need for a meal, that thought is still trying hard to overpower one other in the back of my head:

It was like the radio host was giving me directions. Like he *knew* where I was. He knew what I thought! How in the hell could he possibly-

The exit sign comes into view in my headlights, and an excited grin forms on my face.

*What was I just thinking about?*

I merge onto the exit ramp, and my grin becomes wider when the lights on a sign and a small building are revealed over the hill just down the road. The sign is a red and yellow circle that reads “Friendly Burger” with the bottom text, “A place where you can never be alone!” The mascot in the center is a cute cheeseburger with big eyes and a smile, rubbing his belly, satisfied from his meal.

Good enough for me. I turn right towards the building and pull into the parking lot, my mouth watering more after every yard. I smell the delicious seasoned patties as soon as I leave my car. My stomach notices the smell too because it’s rumbling louder, begging me to go inside.

Once the door is opened and the bell on top is sounded, I see the many people sitting inside, but I only take one glance. Nothing can distract me from the greasy, outstanding fast food that I’m about to consume.

The cashier is already at the register, turning to me to say, “Hi! Welcome to Friendly Burger, where you can never be alone! What can I get you?”

I’m ecstatic to hear those words knowing that the meal would only be in my mouth sooner and sooner at this point.

I look at the menu briefly. The biggest combo on the menu would suffice. “Let me get a Large Double Buttery Friendlyburger meal with a Vanilla milkshake to go with it, please.”

She rings up the order into the computer in front of her. She looks up at me with that same smile and says simply, “Okee-dokee! That’ll be out in just an eensy minute!”

I stop in my tracks just after taking my wallet from my pocket, “Don’t I have to pay?”

She laughs heartily, “Oh, of course not! Here at Friendly Burger, we’re just happy to help your hunger, and have you as our guest!”

“Well, thanks!” I put my wallet back in my pocket.

She leans forward on the table, still smiling wide, but now, almost dreamlike. “So, what brings you around here?”

“Well, I’m a traveling salesman. I had a meeting in northern Wisconsin, so I’m taking the U.P. as a shortcut back home.”

“Traveling salesman! You must be on the road quite a bit!”

“Yeah, it’s part of the job. It’s not bad, though.”

“Don’t you get lonely?” Her smile grows more like a concerned smirk than a dreamy twinkle.

I stammer, “Well- not really. I enjoy being by myself. It’s peaceful.”

“Are you sure? It must be sad being on your own all the time...”

I wonder at her statement for a moment. Was it sad? Was *I* tired of being alone? Of course not. It’s what I’ve gotten used to. Right?

“I don’t think so...”

She leans back, “You don’t *think* so, huh? Are you sure about that?”

I begin to feel uneasy, cringing slightly at her repetitive questions, “I mean, I guess I feel down sometimes? But that’s what I signed up for. I’m okay with it.”

Suddenly, the cashier's eyes transfer from full of life to dull. She stands up straight, adjusting her shoulders and neck, and says ominously, “You may want to rethink your answer.”

When her words come into my psyche, I’m finally able to witness my surroundings. The restaurant is disgusting. Mold and grime are forming from the floor, inching their way up the walls. And, the customers sitting at the booth and tables are absolutely *ravenous*. They’re hardly taking a breath in between the bites of their food, much of which fills the tabletops entirely. The kitchen behind the cashier is also eerily quiet, as though she is the only person working.

She turns to a counter behind her where she picks up a tray full of fried sides, burgers, sodas, and milkshakes. She passes me, leaving the kitchen to the dining area where she tosses the outrageous amount of food onto an already filled table for the four people sitting there. They begin opening the boxes and unwrapping wrappers immediately, shoving the food down their throat like pigs, and licking the table where the drinks had spilled. I nearly retch at the sight of them, and my appetite melts away quickly.

They finish their food inhumanly fast, and each and every one of them hugs the cashier and kisses her on the cheek, forehead, and neck in gratitude. When they part from her, sitting back down, she makes her way back behind the counter.

“They were like you before,” She begins, “nobody to see or come home to. Nobody to love or hate. They were alone. They were *lonely*. And I felt for them. I felt for them because *I* was them, too. But, here at Friendlyburger, we can all be in each other’s company. You don’t have to be alone anymore. You can be with me, with all of us. Just sit at a table, and your food will be out shortly.”

My hunger is gone. The rumbling in my stomach is replaced with a knot. Nothing about this is right. I can't be here. I have to leave.

"Well," I respond shakily, backing away towards the exit, "I'm not lonely. I like my life, and I'll be leaving."

I can feel the door press against my back. I turn to leave and scream when the cashier appears in front of me behind the glass. "I don't think you understand. You don't want to leave, and you don't want to refuse service."

I cower at her, backing away again and huddling by a sauce and napkin station in the center of the dining room. "What happens if I do?"

She smiles again, delighted that I had asked that question. She shifts her head towards a table next to the exit, where a man sits with dozens of burgers in front of him. I see him take each bite, and the meat is nothing like the meat I've seen in any sort of meal before. It looks to be extra chewy, stringy, and sickeningly gray.

*Oh my god. Oh my god!*

The cashier turns back to me, "So, you can be like the satisfied customer eating, or the poor soul he is eating. The one who lies to themselves, the one who suppresses their misery." She disappears again and was back behind the counter, holding a tray of the slop. "It's your choice."

Sweat and tears pour down every inch of my body. I suddenly feel it. I can finally feel the pain of being alone for so long. I need people. I need sustenance. I am *so* hungry. Finally, after that long thought, I take the tray from her hands and whisper, "What are you?"

She smiles again sweetly. "I'm your best friend."

I choose a table mindlessly, one in the corner of the dining room. I unwrap one of the meals and take the first bite.

Then, I chew.

I swallow.

It feels so hot, so juicy, so safe, and wonderful. I take another bite, which led to another, and another. I dig in after that, unwrapping every meal, opening every box, taking the lids off the milkshakes, and pouring them down my throat. Without conscience, someone walks up behind me and wraps their arms around my body, and it's so unbelievably satisfying. Being here is the best thing that could have happened to me.

I now have people all around me, sharing their food, asking me questions, and enjoying my company. I am not alone. In the corner of my eye, the cashier stands at the counter, smiling kindly. She nods as I carry on stuffing my face and sinking in the attention.

Because of Friendly Burger, my starvation is satiated. The people around me and inside my stomach give me warmth. I am home. Thank you for this, Friendly Burger. Thank you.