

### Burger Reward

Family pictures deserve a reward. I'm not trying to pull off facial yoga for an hour and not get something out of it. My fifteen-year-old self can only handle my five younger brothers for so long. So, what exactly is the reward? A trip to Five Guys, featuring greasy burgers and big wedgy fries.

"Order number fifty-one, fifty-one!"

Dad holds both Nehemiah, eight months old, and the door to Five Guys for my mom, myself, Samuel, Elijah, Caleb, and Luke. I breathe in the smell of burgers that weigh in at three-and-a-half inches and 800 Calories. A fat man who's probably here thrice a week in a red hat with a Razorback on it two-hands the monstrosity into his mouth. Some grease glistens on his beard. He looks pleased.

Yum. I want to be pleased.

Dad holds Nehemiah, bouncing him up and down while he orders.

"Six cheeseburgers and three large fries, please."

He only orders three large fries because one order of large fries from Five Guys is like three orders of large fries from McDonald's. Five Guys fries are special. Five Guys fries are only from Idaho and only grown north from the 42<sup>nd</sup> parallel. That's where the best potatoes are. Higher density and stuff. That's what their Facebook post said, anyways.

"That's coming right up. Your number is fifty-seven."

Dad walks away, but the cashier is staring at Nehemiah's head. I feel it is my duty to inform the incumbent that my dad did not, in fact, inflict the wounds upon Nehemiah's head.

"They're stitches."

The cashier looks quickly at me and then away, embarrassed. "Sorry, sir."

What a jerk. Then again, I guess it'd be hard for the cashier to know my family started fostering Nehemiah, a shaken baby, two months after he was born. It'd be hard for him to know that Nehemiah had to have three brain surgeries in the past two months. It'd be hard for him to know that Nehemiah would have died if he hadn't been helicoptered to the Little Rock Children's Hospital the same night cerebrospinal fluid was spouting out of his swollen head like a geyser. Still, it's not nice to stare. At least the cashier called me sir.

"Order number fifty-two, fifty-two !"

Dad hands Frankenstein Baby to Mom. "I'll go get us another table."

By "table" Dad means the only other table still available at Five Guys at 6:00 p.m. on a Saturday. Being a family of eight, we usually combine two four-person tables so we can eat together like, you know, a family.

Dad enlists the help of Samuel, the family buttkisser, and the two carry four chairs over to the other free table that Mom had led us to. Dad goes back for the table, and the other people in the restaurant stare at him while he hoists it above his head, sidewise-shimming around the other table and chairs. I don't think he notices their stares though. Even if he does, he doesn't care.

I do notice their stares, and I do care. I think it's fine, I guess. He's doing a weird thing for our family's benefit. Surely everyone else in the restaurant will see that? Still, why did he have to shimmy between that fat guy with the Razorback hat and that nice young brunette? The fat guy had to scoot in and squish himself between the back of the chair and the edge of the table. The brunette just ducked under the table base.

Dad sits the table down and we push our chairs in. He and Samuel go away to get waters.

“Sam, remember, no ice.” Samuel always forgets I hate ice. Or maybe he always remembers and he just likes tormenting me with water that antarcitics my head.

My dad also torments me. Not intentionally, I don't think, although one time he was leading worship at our church and he sucked the microphone like a kid sucking a lollipop. It was funny, and he's always told me you gotta eat the microphone when you're talking into it so it'll pick up your voice, so maybe he wasn't actually trying to embarrass me. No, my dad doesn't usually intentionally torment me, he just doesn't care what other people think and that is concerning.

My dad's social awareness got even lower when my family started fostering. Fostering is tough, to be sure. Usually, foster care kids have variations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or reactive attachment disorder (RAD). RAD basically means that it's hard for that person to feel anything emotionally, including shame or embarrassment. Raising your own kids is embarrassing enough. Raising kids who don't give a word-my-mom-doesn't-want-me-to-say is even harder. Raising kids who are three and five that have PTSD and RAD is he—well, you know, my mom doesn't want me to say that word either.

“Order number fifty-three, fifty-three!”

“SHUT UP!” A high-pitched scream from my three-year-old brother. I squeeze my shoulders towards my body and look down at the table.

As I was saying, zero social awareness for foster kids. Caleb and Luke are prime examples of this. The best thing I can do at this point is lean my head against my hand so people don't see my face and wait for the burger and fries I had smiled so hard for.

Mom leans towards Luke and tilts her head. “Luke, what's wrong?”

I honestly don't know how Mom remains so calm all the time. Luke basically just yelled into her ear. I'd be giving Luke a piece of his own words, with a small addition: "YOU SHUT UP!" All that patience has got to be charging taxes somewhere. Don't get me wrong, I love my Mom. All I'm saying is that there's a reason she has to dye her hair black.

Luke points at the microphone near the pickup station. "MOOOM, that guy is talking so LOUW-DUH!"

Elijah leans his black hair towards me, "Look who's talking."

Elijah, my man. You understand. I just can't respond to you. I'm the oldest. I got to be an example. Hence me not saying the bad words earlier.

"Honey, that's his job."

Luke furrows his red eyebrows and crosses his arms. "But it's uh-noying-guh!"

Elijah leans in again. "So are you."

Ha. Elijah is funny. One time he told this one joke—oh man. More people have started staring at us. The man in the Razorback hat, chair now a comfortable distance away from his table, is still facing his burger, but his eyes are slanted sideways looking at us. The brunette's eyes are raised and she's looking out the window, bobbing her skinny leg up and down. At least she's not looking at us.

Mom puts her hand on Luke's bony shoulder. "Baby, that's his job."

What a terrible thing trauma is. I swear, if I ever have kids, I'm going to treat them well so my oldest doesn't have to sit in the shame of it. The shame of having your freckle-faced adopted brother yell at the Deliverer of Good News. Come on, Luke, can't you see what's happening? That man is about to announce the delivery of my reward for family pictures, and

you're yelling at him? Not to mention, your yelling is attracting other people's stares! And now that brunette thinks my family is super weird!

"Order number fifty-four, fifty-four!"

"SHUT UP!"

I guess he can't really help it. It's just embarrassing having thirty-something faces trying not to look at but definitely looking at my wailing wall of a brother. Don't they know he can't really help it? Haven't they ever heard of PTSD and RAD? Why am I the only mature, socially aware one in here?

Mom purses her lips. "Luke, it is not okay to yell—"

"Mom! Mom!" Caleb is staring at the table with tears in his eyes.

Oh boy. Now they're both at it. The terrible twosome.

"What is it?"

"There's salt on the table!"

Oh my gosh, Caleb. Salt is on the table. Please, call 911. Please, shut this place down. Toss out the peanut oil they're cooking my burger in. Please, somebody, call the hazmat team. This is a catastrophe. Hitler ate salt, and we all know what that means.

It means I'm burying my head in my palms, that's exactly what it means. Elijah, clearly following my lead, does a double facepalm.

Mom pulls a napkin out of the dispenser and hands it to Caleb. "Honey, wipe it off."

"Order number fifty-five, number fifty-five!"

"SHUT UP!"

"Mom, I cay-yun't!" Caleb's whine turns into a sob.

"Yes, you can—wait, Elijah, don't—"

But Mom is too late. Elijah had already taken his hand away from his face and reached across the table and used his white sleeve from his buttoned-up dress shirt to wipe the salt off of Caleb's spot on the table. Not only did Elijah disobey my indirect order, but he also wiped some salt onto Caleb's pants.

Caleb clutched the back of his chair. "Mooom! There's salt on my pants!!"

No. Please. I'll do anything. Just get this salt off my pants. I swear I'll tell you everything. Death Star Plans? R2-D2 has them. You want to know where Nessie is? She escaped to the Bermuda Triangle. Holy Grail? Bigfoot has it. I'll tell all. Please, just get this salt off my pants. I have a family!

Unfortunately.

Elijah raises his hands that should have been covering his face. "Dude, I wasn't trying to."

"Order number fifty-six, fifty-six!"

"SHUT. UUUP!"

Dad, followed by Samuel, finally wades his way through the people who have all decided that eating is not as fun as staring at my spectacle of a family.

Mom is looking at Dad with a half-smile and shrugged shoulders. Dad pulls his lips inside his mouth and hands out water.

"Okay. Luke, be quiet. Here." I take my water from Sam. It has ice in it. Guess he decided I haven't suffered enough. Jerk.

Caleb is still crying.

"Dude, what's wrong?"

Caleb keeps sobbing.

Mom looks at Caleb. “Oh, it was just some salt.”

Dad raises his eyebrows. “Did it get in his eyes?”

Worse Dad. The salt got on his pants. Can you—

“Order number fifty-seven, fifty-seven!”

“SHUUT UP!”

Mom looks at the human fire alarm, then turns back to Dad. “No, it was on his table.”

And his pants. Dad, he could have died.

Dad leans in towards the table to begin a reprimand, but the edges of his mouth are twitching like he’s about to smile or something. Surely he’s not about to smile. Then again, he would smile at a situation like this.

“Order number fifty-seven please, fifty-seven.”

“SHUUUT UUUP!”

Samuel grabs Luke’s arm and points a finger at him. “Luke, you shut up.” Mom covers her mouth, trying to suppress a laugh. Samuel turns to Dad. “That’s our number.”

Of course, the family butt-kisser can get away with things the eldest child can’t. But thanks Sam, for doing the things I can’t, even though you put ice in my water.

Dad closes his eyes and pushes off the table to get the burgers. Seventy-four eyes are watching my family members, family members who are either furious or laughing and who definitely don’t understand the gravity of our situation. What is the gravity of our situation? Everyone in this place is looking at us! Even the people standing in line to order are looking between us and the menu.

Mom puts her hand on my back and keeps her smile facing the ground. Thanks, Mom. At least you understand how humiliating this is for me.

Dad brings back the burgers and plops each of them in front of us. Thank you. Hallelujah. He cuts Caleb and Luke's burger in half with a "You two are on silent" and sits down next to Mom, who is smiling underneath her hand over her mouth. Samuel is staring at Caleb and Luke, shaking his head. Elijah has finally regained his composure and is slowly opening the burger wrapping, corner to corner. Nehemiah is oblivious. Luke is incredulous that the stupid man keeps yelling numbers. Caleb is horrified that salt had dared manifest itself on his part of the table. I sink my head low to my reward like a giraffe drinking water.

This whole dang eatery is staring at us staring at the table and each other. My job? Eat my burger with two hands without raising my head more than three inches off the table. The burger wrapper edge makes a nice little bowl that shields me from people's stares.

Dad puts his arm around Mom and smiles like he just won the lottery on the day of the apocalypse.

"Honey, if you want, before we leave, I can change Nehemiah's diaper right here on top of the table."

Mom snuggled her head into Dad's chest, laughing. "Oh honey, stop it!"

"Hey, Spence." I look up from the safety of my wrapper, chin still in my makeshift bowl. Sam is pushing a cup of water towards me. It doesn't have any ice in it. "This one's yours."