

509 Café

It's a sunny Thursday afternoon, but business is slow for the 509 Café on Greenfield Avenue. The sidewalk in front resembles a narrow trench of melting snow and ice. Kids with colorful backpacks walk by, returning home from the nearby school.

All five black tables in the dining area are empty; the Heinz ketchup, salt and pepper shakers, Cholula sauce, and black container with the usual assortment of colorful sugar packets are precisely positioned in the middle of the tables, waiting to be used. The black metal chairs are neatly tucked in as if nobody used them today.

A six-foot tall blackboard announcing in pink chalk "The 509 Café has bread, milk and eggs!" stands in the corner next to a large display cooler since there is no room on the sidewalk. Behind the cooler that contains randomly scattered meat and cheese is a sliding-door refrigerator filled with breakfast and sandwich ingredients. The beige wall above is bare; the only things left are little pieces of white sticky foam squares that once held the menu posters. The laminated menu now sits on the black-and-white checkered windowsill, hoping to attract the occasional pedestrians.

Dressed in blue jeans and grey T-shirt, a petite woman with a short pixie-style haircut paces behind a tall wooden counter. She is barely visible behind the stacked paper and ceramic cups. Busy cleaning up, she mumbles the lyrics of a song playing from the 90's-style stereo that is competing with the loud hum of the refrigerator. The big black speakers in all four corners of the dining room are silent; they have no one to play for. The old sanyo TV hangs from the ceiling, blankly staring into space.

Suddenly the door creaks and a large man wearing a black leather jacket comes in. His shoulder-length dirty-blond hair and Choppers baseball cap with metal spikes frame his rugged, serious-looking face. He is chewing loudly on a wooden toothpick.

"Do you want to have a seat?" asks the petite woman.

"I'm just gonna have coffee," answers the man in a loud, scratchy voice as he's walking to the dining room. He takes off his jacket and wraps it around the chair. The light grey tank with a West-Coast-Chopper cross exposes his tattooed, wrinkled arms: a barbed wire around his right arm, a red heart with "Beth" written in a white sash on the other. He places a black Harley Davidson fanny pack on the table and walks away towards the restrooms.

While he's gone, an older, bald man in a navy blue sports jacket comes in. His face looks childish, resembling a person with Down syndrome.

“Hello, how we doing?” the petite woman greets him.

“Can I have some chicken fingers and fries?” he quietly asks.

“Sure.”

“And do you have diet Coke?”

“Of course we do. We have that one saved especially for you,” she assures him.

The man sits down at an empty table next to the tattooed man. He takes some change out and, staring at the silver coins, he asks the tattooed man if he knows how much candy bars are. “I dunno if I have enough money,” he says in an apologetic voice.

The tattooed man slowly lifts his head and, not saying anything, condescendingly stares down the inquirer. The bald man’s face remains calm as he stares back. Not receiving an answer, the bald man turns his back and walks to the counter, the tattooed man staring after him.

“How much are your candy bars?”

“A dollar.”

“Do I have enough?” he asks, handing the change over to the woman.

“You only have 85 cents, but that’s alright. Go ahead and grab one.”

The bald man picks up Reese’s cups and returns to his seat, his eyes sparkling like a little child’s. As he’s opening the package, the tattooed man stands up and, shaking his head, starts walking towards the bald man. He slowly passes him and stops at the coffee station in the back to get some creamer. He sits back down and stirs the creamer in with a loud rattling of the spoon. He takes a loud sip, nervously moving his right leg up and down.

Staring out the window, the tattooed man suddenly clenches his fists and, leaning backwards in his chair, stretches out his arms. The nervous movement of his leg abruptly stops. He locks his arms behind his head, exposing his armpits with dark red bumps.

“Here you go, Ronnie!” the petite woman announces, bringing the bald man’s food. He opens his diet Coke and hunches over the plate, carefully slicing up all five chicken fingers before taking a bite. Completely immersed in the eating experience, his eyes fixed on the plate, he is oblivious to the world around him.

The tattooed man continues to sip his coffee and resumes the nervous movement of his leg. Getting up twice to refill his cup, he slightly shakes his head every time he passes the bald man, then returns to staring out the window.

Having finished his food, the bald man burps out loudly. "Excuse me!" He burps again, this time even louder. "Pardon me!"

Interrupted by the loud burps, the tattooed man swiftly turns his head towards the bald man, who is now putting his jacket on. He turns around and matter-of-factly addresses the tattooed man: "Okay. Alright. I'm hitting the hay. But I don't have the okay yet." The tattooed man stares at him, confused. The bald man's voice suddenly changes and, out of nowhere, he cheerfully exclaims, "But no hay to hit!" He tosses his arms wide open, leans in towards the tattooed man's face and shouts even louder, his eyes almost popping out, "There's no hay to hit!"

He then hurriedly walks up to the counter, leaving behind the startled tattooed man. Amused, the tattooed man chuckles, his face brightening up as the bald man walks out of the café.