

Chicken Burger Tuesdays

By

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Year Nine Civics. Need I say more?

Mr Bordwell, an older sort of guy, mostly harmless, drones on about systems of government or some such thing.

The class is bored well indeed.

The only one who seems interested in anything is a ratty boy sitting closest to the door.

He is Tyrone C. Williamson and you'd never forget him if you saw him.

He is the class punching bag and an awfully inviting one at that. Tyrone isn't interested in Mr Bordwell. He stares only at the clock as it tick, tick, ticks.

It's less than a minute until 11.20, the time Tyrone has been waiting for.

He can barely hold in his excitement.

The last minute is excruciating.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Sweat drips.

Time slows.

And finally it clicks over and the bell screams and Tyrone jumps as if electrocuted, and he's halfway out the door when Mr Bordwell screams too.

"Excuse me, Mr Williamson!"

Tyrone stops and turns. The class is half packed up but stop to stare. General schoolyard chatter drifts in from outside.

"Where do you think you're going? I didn't say you could go." Mr Bordwell is that classic teacher combination of angry and confused.

"But, but the –," Tyrone stutters.

“But nothing! Come on back in and wait with everyone else.”

“BUT CHICKEN BURGER!”

Although every muscle wants to run, he stays at the door, compelled by Mr Bordwell’s authority.

The class, although keen to leave for lunch, is amused by this latest entry into the “Tyrone’s a freakin’ weirdo” files.

“We all want to go for lunch but we can’t until you come back inside, Tyrone.”

Tyrone makes a big show of coming back inside. He hovers over his seat, barely touching it.

“Thank you. As I said, drafts next week ladies and gentlemen.” Mr Bordwell turns to Tyrone. “Okay, now you can go.”

Tyrone bolts outside. You can practically smell burnt rubber.

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Tyrone bounds towards the tuckshop, almost knocking over a bunch of people.

But the line is already huge. He groans in disappointment, loudly enough that students nearby notice and guffaw. Defeated, Tyron joins the queue anyway.

And waits.

And waits.

After an age, Tyrone gets to the front of the line but the teacher on duty stops him before he can go into the tuckshop proper. In one of life’s cruellest jokes, Tyrone can see the hot food warmer ahead, its glowing lights tempting him, illuminating his heart’s desire.

There’s a white cardboard container.

There’s still a chicken burger there! It’s a miracle!

Tyrone waits; plans his moves. The teacher lets him and a few other students through.

Tyrone rushes toward the chicken burger, he's reaching for it – but the guy in front of him grabs it first.

Tyrone yelps in pain. The student, one of those man-child kids who already has a moustache, stares vacantly and offers no apology.

Tyrone picks up a sorry looking sausage roll instead. This is what it's come to.

“2.50, love,” smiles Mrs Moore, the loveliest tuckshop worker in existence. She sees the lad is troubled, though that's pretty much his regular look. Not even a smile from Mrs Moore can salvage today.

Tyrone silently pays for his sausage roll. He eats it and hates every second of his life.

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Lunchtime is not a fun time for someone like Tyrone C. Williamson. He's too weird for the cool kids, too weird for the weird kids, too weird for everyone. He had a few friends, once, but even they got sick of him.

He's not exactly banned from the one safe refuge for peculiar schoolkids everywhere, the library, but even the teachers there don't like it when he comes in. If he just washed his hands, he'd be allowed to touch the books or use the computers. But that's never going to happen.

With nowhere to go and nowhere to be, usually he just walks around trying not to get in the way.

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Next week.

Tyrone is in his regular strategic seat near the door.

Mr Bordwell is talking to some students about their work down the other end of the room.

Tyrone watches the clock count down again. Every second is agony.

Finally the bell rings. Tyrone knows not to run off this time.

He waits.

But Mr Bordwell doesn't do anything. He's too deep in conversation with these students, he hasn't noticed the bell.

The class waits.

Tyrone crawls over his seat like he's got worms. It gets too much. Finally he shouts across the room, "Mr Bordwell! Can we go already?"

Mr Bordwell notices this. He excuses himself from the students he's been talking to and turns to Tyrone. The rest of the class waits as the combatants size each other up.

In the blue corner, Mr Bordwell issues a body blow. "Everyone's free to go except Tyrone."

Over in the red, Tyrone's down but not out. "But sir!"

"I'm going to finish up with these nice students, then you and I are going to talk about manners."

The rest of the class filters out, though a few want to stay and watch the fireworks. After a stern look from Mr Bordwell they scatter.

Mr Bordwell returns to his students and Tyrone sits and stews. This is outrageous! It's probably against the law! If it isn't, it damn well should be!

The conversation drags, probably deliberately. Tyrone's virtually dying.

He can't take any more.

"This is bullshit."

Tyrone leaps from his chair and runs outside.

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The tuckshop line is only about a quarter full! Maybe there's a chance!

But when Tyrone gets to the front, all the chicken burgers are gone. The world's picking on him. He makes do with a sloppy, cold meat pie instead.

Mrs Moore looks on again. This boy's a worry. That's for sure.

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Shoes squeak, kids yell. It's basically chaos in the gym.

Tyrone stands out on the edge. He doesn't really like indoor soccer, but he wants to play. Nobody bothers passing him the ball. He tries a few times to get involved but he's no good and the other kids shove him out of the way. Somebody calls him a freak.

He gives up.

Mr Bordwell comes into the gym. He approaches the teacher on the sideline, makes a joke or two, then points for Tyrone to follow him outside.

Tyrone knows he's in trouble. He didn't even get the chicken burger and he's still gonna get yelled at.

Mr Bordwell leads them outside to the foyer. The teacher towers over the boy. He's not upset. He's just disappointed.

"I'm not upset, Tyrone, I'm just disappointed."

Tyrone has no reply.

"Do you know why I might be disappointed in you, son?"

Tyrone squirms. "Cos I left before." He doesn't really like talking to anyone except his mum.

"Yes. Now, why was that wrong?"

"You told me to stay."

"Yes, because you were being rude."

"No I wasn't, I just –"

"– You were yelling at me! That's not on, is it? Reckon you'd be allowed to talk to your boss like that when you've got a job?"

"I don't want a job."

Mr Bordwell looks at Tyrone strangely. "Why don't you want a job?"

"Dunno. Not good at anything."

This hasn't gone how Mr Bordwell thought.

"... Well, next week, you and I are spending first break together after class. Does that seem fair?"

Panic flashes across Tyrone's face, his stomach. "No! Is – what – is there something else?"

"No. You did the wrong thing and you have to live with the consequences. That's life."

"Can I at least go get tuckshop first?"

"Nope. Sorry. Better pack some lunch that day. Now get back to class."

Tyrone trudges back inside. No one's got a harder life than this guy.

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Next week.

The clock ticks down but Tyrone doesn't bother looking. The bell rings and the class is dismissed but Tyrone just sits there.

What's the point in life without chicken burgers anyway?

Mr Bordwell comes over and pulls out a chair opposite Tyrone.

"Mr Williamson! You can grab your lunch from your bag if you like."

Tyrone sits there. "Don't have any."

"You don't have lunch today?"

"Nuh."

"What do you normally have?"

"Chicken burgers."

"Aren't they only on Tuesdays?"

Tyrone nods. Mr Bordwell frowns.

“So what do you do the other days?”

Tyrone shrugs. Mr Bordwell frowns harder.

“Do you just not like anything else?”

“Not really.”

“Do you get, what, pocket money for the canteen?”

“Sometimes.”

Mr Bordwell starts to feel bad. He opens up his bag and finds an apple.

“Here, have this. I don’t want it.”

Tyrone recoils. “Apples suck.”

“Eat the bloody apple, Tyrone.”

Tyrone eats the bloody apple, just to get the old guy off his back.

Mr Bordwell studies Tyrone as he eats. He’s been teaching for almost twenty years, and someone like this isn’t new. Odd, but not new.

They sit in awkward silence for a while. Mr Bordwell reads the paper. Tyrone stares outside. Moments pass.

“Look mate, you can head off now if you like. Might still be time to get a chicken burger.”

“They’ll be gone now.”

“Oh. Well you can go anyway.”

Tyrone stands, then stops, thinks.

“Can I stay?”

Mr Bordwell is a little taken aback, but he shrugs.

“Sure. Why not?”

Tyrone pulls out his phone and plays a game. Though this is strictly against school rules, Mr Bordwell lets it slide. He rummages through his bag, finds a sandwich and splits it – half each.

They eat the sandwich. The silence is a little more comfortable.

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A few days Mr Bordwell strides into the back of the tuckshop. The canteen staff put the finishing touches on what will be another fine smorgasbord of delicacies.

Mrs Moore looks up from some paperwork and grins. “Here’s trouble. What are you after?”

“Kell! You know that favour you owe me?”

“No...”

“Ah – must be the one I'm about to owe you then.”

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Next week.

The clock ticks but the spirit seems all but beaten out of Tyrone. The bell rings and he barely reacts. Whatever he does is wrong anyway. Then –

“Tyrone! What are you waiting for? Go on!”

Tyrone looks up to see Mr Bordwell gesticulating wildly for him to leave, go, get that chicken burger! Tyrone picks up his things and rushes outside.

Maybe this time!

Maybe he'll make it!

Outside the classroom, a few of the other students have picked up on Tyrone's potential happiness. As he tries to pick up his bag, they block his path. He tries in vain to get around them, but they shove him away.

Whatever. No time for this. Tyrone throws his book and pencil case vaguely towards his bag and runs off.

When we make the movie of this, this'll be where the wild chase music kicks in.

Tyrone sprints towards the tuckshop. He's running so wildly that he's attracting unwanted attention.

A mean girl shouts, "Run, Forrest, run!"

Tyrone doesn't react, a steely determination in his eye, and also perhaps not understanding the reference.

A couple guys try to drop a shoulder as Tyrone brushes past.

But he dodges!

A cranky teacher screams, "Slow down!"

But he speeds up!

And just when the tuckshop appears ahead, as a vision, a beautiful mirage still too far away to touch –

Some jokester extends a leg in front of Tyrone, who's running too fast to see it.

He trips.

He flies through the air.

Time stops.

For a glorious moment, Tyrone is still, aurally suspended.

Then he crashes. Hard.

Prone on the ground.

This joke isn't funny anymore.

There's genuine concern that he might be hurt.

A crowd gathers.

Then...

Like Lazarus, like The Dark Knight, Tyrone rises.

Bruised, battered, bloody.

But arisen.

He runs.

Tyrone skids into the end of the line. It isn't dramatically long but it is Chicken Burger Tuesday, so you never know. It's line ball.

He gets to the front. He approaches the food warmer...

Nothing.

All this for nothing. This is where the music would fade. Stunned silence would overwhelm.

Tyrone briefly wonders if life is still worth living, if hope truly exists. Instead he reaches for a hot dog.

Then – from behind the counter, the voice of an angel.

“Tyrone?” Mrs Moore beams, her face divinely illuminated by the food warmer's lights.

Tyrone stares at her and nods.

“Come round here, mate.”

She indicates for Tyrone to come to the side door of the tuckshop. He does as he's told, unsure what to think.

Mrs Moor opens the door. And in her hands – it can't be! – a white cardboard version of heaven.

A chicken burger.

“This is for you.”

Tyrone looks up, dumbstruck. The music swells.

He wonders how. He wonders why. His hand stretches out and he takes the burger. It doesn't feel real. He's ready to wake up now, the dream's over now, he has to get up and go to school and be miserable now.

Tyrone looks up at Mrs Moore. Her smile makes him smile. He tries to talk, but the words come out all garbled. She chuckles and he tries again.

“Thanks.”

Tyrone reaches for his wallet.

“Oh no, love, don't worry about that.”

“Oh.” Tyrone is puzzled. Things cost money, and frankly at \$3.50 chicken burgers are a steal. He'd happily pay \$6 or \$7.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, love. And there'll be one waiting for you every week. Come see me every day – Mrs Moore. I'll find you something, all right? And you might want to go look in the bathroom, your arm looks a bit nasty.”

Tyrone looks down and notices a bloody patch on his elbow. There's no time to care about such things! He grins from ear to ear. This dream is going pretty good all right. It's starting to feel real. He should probably get out of there before he ruins it.

If only he had the words to say how much it meant. He only has two, so they'll have to do.

“Thanks miss.”

“My absolute pleasure.”

Tyrone turns to leave. Then he stops.

He runs back and gives Mrs Moore a quick one-armed hug. Then he runs away.

Mrs Moore can't wipe the smile off her face. And she wouldn't want to.

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Next week.

Tyrone sits back and relaxes as the clock ticks down. For once, he's calm.

The bell rings and the class bustles away but Tyrone stands, stretches, takes his time.

Mr Bordwell approaches his desk. "Don't you want to get going, Tyrone? It's Tuesday."

Tyrone stifles a yawn. "Don't need to. Mrs Moore keeps a special burger just for me."

"Does she now?"

"Yeah. I don't know why."

"Must just be a nice person."

"She is. See ya, sir."

"Don't forget your homework."

Tyrone saunters on out.

Mr Bordwell chuckles. Some days it's worth it.

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Now at lunchtime Tyrone C. Williamson is a changed boy. He walks around the school, still nowhere to go and nowhere to be, but with a spring in his step, a smile on his face and a chicken burger in his hand.