

## **Life and Times of an Amigos Manager: a true story**

"Look. This is the perfect microcosm in which to study democracy in action. It's obvious it doesn't work at all." Eric paced, grabbing some napkins and stuffing them into sacks, the repetitive action in perfect pace to the music -- to the conversation. Rhythm was the key. "Listeners get to request whatever they want, and what do you get? It's complete trash. Do you really want that kind of system running your government?"

"Yeah dude, that's so on." It was simply another no-brainer response from the most recent in a long line of employees. Few actually spent the time in thought necessary to engage in discussion, and even fewer realized the true significance of certain oddities. Jon was no different. "This song totally sucks. I didn't want to say anything though. Who listens to this stuff anyway? Gawd!"

"That's what happens. You get some chump with a wack-ass everybody-listen-to-what-I-have-to-say plan on the platform, and it's a stupid listener request show for the entire term. Radio shows are a perfectly run scientific test of what happens when Democracy is in operation."

"Yeah, but there's no control." It was a feeble argument, but handily offered.

"What kind of control is there in politics? It's a free country. People say what they want to. Trouble is, you can say whatever worthlessness comes to mind, and if you get some other people to go along with it, then that's it. The intelligentsia of a culture shouldn't be ruled by a pop culture, but in a democracy, they necessarily are. It's a degradation inherent in the system." Eric delivered the final words and hurried off. His timing was perfect with the 5/4 rhythm that had been pounded into the floor and dishes and utensils since he got there. He grabbed a box. Feet slid in pivot, sounding somewhat akin to a brush on a snare. Footsteps resumed, and a hand tapped some shelving to pick up the place of a cymbal.

"Here's the thing..." Eric stopped.

Jon looked at him with that singular sort of look that clearly meant, *what's the thing?*

Eric opened his mouth to continue, but there was a peculiar sort of sizzling coming from the back door, just more than 6 feet to his right. His head turned. The box dropped from his hand and time slowed as muscles began to work. The box hit the floor and burst as plastic-ware exploded across the tile. At the same instant, a larger explosion ripped through the store as the back door was blown clean from its hinges. Time slowed further. The pounding of feet at a dead run resonated loudly for a full three strides before Eric lunged and threw himself clear of debris. Head tucked, he landed and rolled, springing instantly to his feet.

"Get in the cooler."

The discussion of politics was obviously over, suddenly ended by the entrance of several militants with the look of business about them.

"More Runza employees," muttered Eric. "Just what I need."

He reached under one of the prep tables and grabbed a misplaced deck brush. For a moment humor replaced resolve as he realized the fortune of it having not been properly stored. That didn't for a moment mean that people could just start sticking things anywhere they wanted. Then again, it's not like people would stop leaving the store in a mess... – ever --...and Eric wouldn't stop being frustrated as he reorganized a wide variety of misplaced items several times a week. The deck brush was poorly balanced, but a poorly balanced deck brush in the hand is worth two nuclear bombs in the bush. Or something like that.

A quick assessment followed: three skinnies, most likely to be semi-skilled should it come to a fist fight, which he was counting on due to the distinctive lack of high impact projectile weapons available in fast food restaurants. One fattie, apparently armed, and probably the best first target on account of his likely dependence on a firearm. Two more silhouettes in the doorway, not near enough to even be of concern at the moment.

Two quick steps and a leap left Eric midair, Body arched like a drawn bow. The deck brush whistled through the air as muscles strained. The bow released it's bolt and the weighty end of the deck brush rushed with the lethal momentum of an Austrian Railjet train heading towards an amoeba. The fattie raised his weapon to block the blow, but the speeding shaft simply snapped allowing the heavy sharp-cornered brush to maintain course and smash his face. A poor choice of tactic, but one doesn't expect good choices from Runza workers. The assailed fell into a slackened heap as unconsciousness turned his already lacking musculature into Jello.

The three skinnies whirled and surrounded Eric, along with a fourth from outside who seemed content to watch from a distance. The broken shaft of the deck brush handle whirled slowly as Eric waited for the first move. It didn't take long to come. A leg flashed out, lashing for Eric's knee and then waist. Alas, the plans of many fall short for lack of balance; and such was the case as Eric moved into the second kick, arm wrapping around the skinnie's leg as the staff smacked smartly into his skull. A skiff of shoes from behind brought Eric whirling. The staff flowed in a smooth arc that was intended to provide a defense. Instead of creating a good reason to stay back, the splintered end of the rod caught another attacker in the throat, lowering the man's blood pressure simultaneously contributing to the low male life expectancy in the U.S.

With two left - plus the observer - Eric had a moment to breathe. With his back to a shelf, his eyes shifted from the two men who stalked him to the third who remained in the doorway. Smoke and debris still filled the room, and so he slowed his breathing intentionally to avoid coughing at an inopportune moment.

*"Inopportune moments come often enough as it is,"* he thought.

At that very moment, the nearest man sputtered and then coughed.

*"Case in point,"* came the mental response even as the physical response delivered a blow to the shoulder, and then ribs, and then knee. The man fell to the ground, clutching at his broken kneecap and trying to decide whether to continue coughing or howl in pain. The broken ribs and dislocated collar bone didn't make the decision process easy.

Finally, the last assailant made his move. His kick came faster than could have been expected. With dust irritating his eyes, Eric struggled to defend himself, taking a kick in the ribs that left him short of breath. Another kick struck hard at his leg. The third smashed into the deck brush handle and broke it in two, but left the man unbalanced. There was no fourth kick. Even hurting and breathing hard, Eric moved in suddenly. The broken pieces of the handle whirled, striking ribs and neck and limbs, and finally groin. The attacker fell back, crouched and struggling to remain on his feet. The man in the doorway turned to run.

"Get back here you bastard!"

Eric tried to reach him, but the writhing of a man in the greatest sort of pain imaginable tripped him. Eric stumbled and fell, but turned the momentum into a roll which brought him springing forward and back to his feet. With that momentum flew one half of the deck brush handle. The splintered shaft spun on a true axis as it whirled through the air before catching the runner in the back of the head. The fleeing man stopped running and crashed to the cement, no velocity lost as he slid several feet on his chin before collapsing in a crumpled heap.

As Eric assessed the situation the walk-in door opened. "Very nicely done." It was all Jon could say, but Eric had more than rhetoric in mind.

"Get the spicy sauce Jon. The big bucket".

Jon paused a moment.

"Just get it."

The further prompting got him moving, although his eyes still lingered on the bloody pool that surrounded one of the bodies. Eric hoped he was ready for this. He would have to be. You didn't really get to choose how and when you broke someone in. The time came and you just did it.

With a harsh kick to the knee, Eric introduced himself in a more formal, if still un-cordial manner. "Welcome to Amigos. My name is Eric." He kicked again before continuing, "can I get your name for the ticket please?"

"Screw you. We won't talk." The man gasped, clutching the skin that surrounded

shattered bone.

Eric glared for all he was worth. He considered wearing his stocking cap. Laurie had said it made him look tougher. Then again, she also said he'd run and scream like a girl if he ever got in a fight. The hat was dismissed altogether.

"Well, two of you won't talk. And your other friend there looks like he'll only be talking in falsetto from now on."

Jon emerged from the walk-in, having finally found the spicy sauce.

"If you don't want to talk, we'll just have to provide some incentive."

Eric turned and grabbed one of the bucket's handles with one hand while he flipped the lid off with the other. The bucket landed with a slam that left a slosh of red sauce over the man's face and shirt, and all over the floor.

"I don't get paid enough for this," Eric muttered as he grabbed a wad of paper towels.

That's when the horror began. No, not horror for Eric or Jon, although there's no doubt as to whether Jon was able to sleep for days after witnessing what followed. Eric took the towel and dipped one corner into the spicy sauce, careful to let it soak completely.

"So, again, what's your name? It's a simple question..."

Eric braced the man's head with his knees and pried open one of his eyeballs... the spicy-soaked paper towel lowered precisely into his eye. His lid fluttered violently as the hot peppers in the sauce burned. His lid fluttered further and pulled the soaked paper in, grinding it into his eyeball. Screams of such an unearthly quality are rarely heard outside facilities designed to contain them. It took only moments to elicit the desired response.

"T-t-tim's my name... AAAaaaaahhhhhhhh... I'll tell you anything... a-anything you want. Just... make it s-stop... pleeease. Make it stop!" He writhed, but Eric held his head fast between his knees.

"Very carefully now, I want you to tell me who hired you. Jon, get me some water in a glass. And some milk. Tell me very carefully. I wouldn't want to accidentally get anything in your other eye. You might not be well enough to see your way out of here then. And, you see, I'd be rather upset if you had to stay here for... oh a week or two while you recover. Very upset indeed." Jon handed over a pitcher of luke-warm water, and went to fetch the milk. "... and I'm sure you wouldn't enjoy that very much either."

"Look man... aaaahhhh..." he breathed a deep shuddering breath. "I j-j-just work at Runza. That was my manager that you... got with the deck brush handle. Some guy... he c-came from a l-local meat packing company... c-c-came and said we'd make good cash if we did this job. I got kids man..." he gasped again and tried to roll, but his head was held

fast. "I got four kids. It's just a damn job!"

Eric sighed. *Evil always comes first in the form of innocents who don't know better and have only bad options to choose from,* He thought. *It's no surprise when people forced to choose between bad options make bad choices. A damn shame though.*

"What meat packing company? Think."

The man looked up squinting from his one good eye, looking for some hope of escape. "I... I think it was... something about Protein Products. We were laughing at the name, all of us were. N-not at the money though. It was just a job! Gaaaaahhhhhh..." His eye watered as his lid continued to try to blink the rough paper and spicy out. "Please, can I go now?"

"No." The rough response belied a different action. Eric took the pitcher and poised it over the man's head. "Open your eye, if you can... there, hold it open..." He poured, and the man gasped, but held his eye open with both hands, allowing the painful rinse to complete. Then Eric poured a drip or two of milk to sooth the acid. "Now, get up and get out. I don't care how badly your leg is hurt. And take your friend with you. It's not my concern that he won't be able to reproduce for a while. It may even be for the best if this is how he spends his time."