

American Institution Kirstin Ellsworth

After they had been in McDonald's for seven hours, ten-year-old Danny finally asked when they were going to leave.

"Mom, we've been here forever, can we go home, now?" he whined.

"Yeah, I mean, we've eaten breakfast, lunch, and dinner here, man. If I get another McDonaldland game card, I'm gonna go nuts," said Eric, Danny's older brother.

"Look, boys, you're going to have to ask your father. I'm just not too sure about those police cars outside," said Mrs. Henry as she adjusted her coat like a pillow behind her head. "Can one of you run to the bathroom and get me a drink of water? I think one of those nice cashiers will give you a courtesy cup."

"Christ," murmured Eric as he watched Danny manoeuvre through the groups of people camped out on the floor of the restaurant, "What a suck-butts, always doing what Mom says."

"Eric, that's enough of that language," warned Mr. Henry who was sitting in his own booth furiously scratching off a McDonaldland game card. "Hey, look at that! I won a free-order of fries." Mr Henry's ruddy face shone with excitement. "I've never won anything, except for that one time I won the television set from the Paradise Condo sweepstakes."

"You never won that television set, honey. Remember? We had to drive to La Jolla to look at the condominium development before you could claim the TV, and you said there wasn't a bat's chance in..."

"Forget what I said," growled Mr. Henry, the look of elation completely gone from his face. "You know, you always have to, make some negative comment. Let me be happy, just this once, let me be happy."

Eric swung out of his swivel chair and left before things got worse. The next thing would be the argument about whose family had come over to the house and stayed for two weeks, never once offering to do the dishes or even take them all out to dinner. He had heard the scene before.

"Eric, there's nobody at the counter," said Danny. He had reappeared empty-handed.

"What do you mean, moron, you're such a gufus," Eric replied. "I guess I'll have to get it because little baby here can't ask the lady to help him." Eric mimicked these last words in a mocking baby voice. Danny slouched back to the table. "Move it chicken-

shit," Eric hissed, forcing Danny to run.

Eric walked over to the counter himself. It was getting really dark outside and those goddam police lights, they were lighting up the place like it was a show or something.

"Hey, um, I like need some service here," he yelled back to the kitchen.

"Leave it to these workers, probably lazing off in the back," said an old man who had taken a place in line behind him. He had taken off his shoes and was milling around with a cup of coffee. "Do you know if they have any stirrers around here, son?"

"No, I don't," said Eric. The whole scene was beginning to piss him off. Where were the cashiers, anyways? And really, Danny was right. Why had they been here for seven hours, and why had everyone in the restaurant been there for seven hours? No one came in, no one went. It was kind of weird.

"Hey, bud, how long have you been here?" asked Eric of a twenty-year-old studenty-looking guy with a ponytail.

"Oh, around seven hours. Man, isn't it great? I mean, since the cashiers left we've been, like, helping ourselves to whatever we wanted. Me and my friend, Joe, here, we, like, figured out how to run the shake machine and mixed all the flavors together, you know. Man, I bet Old McDonald would lose it if he knew."

"Yeah," laughed Eric as he watched the guy and his friend vault over the counter into the back. What a bunch of stoners.

"Eric, Eric, would you ask Mrs. Leavinson if I could borrow some Kleenex?" Mrs. Henry's voice drifted over the poker game in the playland birthday room.

"Okay," he growled. Immediately a woman rocking a baby and taking small bites out of a fillet-of-fish sandwich gave him a dirty look. "I just got her down for her after-dinner nap, can you please be quiet?" Eric just rolled his eyes and walked off.

Mrs. Leavinson turned out to be cleaning up coke from the floor when he found her at one of the side booths in the non-smoking section. Her daughter was slurping up what was left from her large size cup with her fat red and yellow straw.

"Well, Eric, fancy meeting you here. Are your folks with you? Over by the emergency exit? Well, I'll have to go over and chat. Sure, here's some

kleenex. Oh, and tell your mother Margery Dunne's daughter had her baby this morning—a healthy eight pound baby boy.”

As Eric walked back to the table an immense anger began to pump through him. This was absurd. They had been in here for seven goddam hours, the cashiers disappeared, no one came in, no one came out...”

“What the hell is going on here!” he screamed. “WHAT THE HELL...” He stopped back in horror. Janie Lantz was standing at the salad bar with her friend, Rachel.

“God, Eric, what's your deal,” Janie asked, frozen in the position of shaking out crumbled imitation bacon bits on her salad.

“Janie, I ah, ah, was just kidding, I...”

“What a dweeb,” snickered Rachel, and they both progressed down the line like they had never seen him before. Eric thought of grabbing a styro-foam plate and trying to catch up with them, but there were too many people in front of him.

“Eric, I really need you over here,” called Mrs. Henry.

“Coming, Mom,” shouted Eric. “I'm coming.”

When he got back to the table, Mr. Henry was gone, the remnants of his game card lying in little pieces on the paper placemat with the pictures of the new McDonald's chicken sandwich on it. Danny was sitting on the floor playing with a strange little boy wearing a plastic Ronald McDonald bib.

“Who's that kid,” asked Eric as he handed Mrs. Henry a wad of pink Puffs kleenex.”

“I don't know, dear. It's a real mystery, but isn't he the cutest thing? Look at that curly black hair. I remember when you were little, you had the nicest hair. I used to comb it back in a...”

“Quit it, Mom.” He looked around to see if Janie and Rachel were in sight. Then he looked down at the kid on the floor. His nose was running, and he had pieces of chicken McNugget on the sleeves of his garanimal shirt. He was trying to color in the picture of the cheeseburgler on his Happy Meal box.

“Geez, Danny, what are ya playing with him for?”

“There's nobody else around,” pouted Danny. “I tried to get Dad to play hangman, but he's in the bathroom trying to dry off his pants from where that old man's hot coffee spilled on them.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Bet he was mad,” laughed Eric.

“It's not funny, Eric, it was hot, I saw steam coming off the cup when the man walked by us,” said Danny.

“It wasn't funny, Eric, waa,waa,waa, I'm a little goddie-two-shoes,” sneered Eric, “it wasn't funny, Eric, I...”

“COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP. WE'VE GOT THE PLACE SURROUNDED, I REPEAT,

COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP.”

Eric was startled by the blaring of a police megaphone. Before he could even move, the right side door burst open and an LAPD officer jumped the ponytailed-student guy.

“You're under arrest, you may remain silent until you...”

“Hey, man, I didn't do nothing. I mean the machine was there, and...” the guy was beginning to blubber.

“Yeah, he didn't do nothing,” pleaded Joe. I was here...”

“Must be the accomplice,” one of the men said matter-of-factly to the officer beside him. “Yep, matches the description. You're under arrest, too.”

Eric watched the scene with morbid fascination. Man, he thought to himself, they really do have television cameras by the cash registers.

“Now, just a minute, these young gentlemen were kind enough to make shakes for my kids, and I just don't see why you're hassling them. Go after real criminals, is this what we pay you for—to pick on harmless kids?” shouted a middle-aged man from the self service tray area.

“Yeah,” echoed the other customers. “Why don't you leave them alone.”

“Really,” said Mrs. Henry indignantly as she bent down to straighten Danny's shirt. “I don't know what the world is coming to. Police officers harassing nice young men. If they ever bothered our Eric, we'd have something to say about it, wouldn't we, Bob.”

“Yes,” Mr. Henry mechanically replied. He was busy rolling down his pants leg so he could tie a bandage from the first aid kit in the Men's Restroom around his burned calf.

“Leave them alone? LEAVE THEM ALONE????!” shouted the policeman. “Are you people morons? These two have held you hostage for seven hours, and you want us to leave them alone?”

“Maybe it's a case of that hostage-taker identification thing like in Iran, sir,” whispered one of the other officers.

“Shut up,” snarled the policeman and then louder, “if you think that paid officials, that the SWAT team that's been on the roof here for more than seven hours, the FBI investigators from L.A. and the men who risked their lives to save you are going to take this kind of ingratitude, then maybe we ought to leave, maybe we ought to just go and...”

“Yeah, why don't you just leave,” shouted the middle-aged man again. “Leave us so we can get some peace, just leave.”

“LEAVE, LEAVE, LEAVE, shouted the restaurant, LEAVE, LEAVE, LEAVE.” Even Mrs. Henry and Eric joined in, “LEAVE, LEAVE, LEAVE.”

“Hey!” shouted someone in the din, “it's Candy Jennings from CNN.”

"And here we are at the scene of the McDonald's hostage take-over in Pasadena, California," gushed Candy Jennings into the camera that appeared from back of the kitchen. "Sir, can you tell me what happened?" She thrust the mike in front of the face of the old man with no shoes who had spilled coffee on Mr. Henry.

"well, I come to McDonald's for my morning cup of coffee, and after I get here all these police cars block up outside, so I decides to stay in here until this here policeman barges in here shouting at some kids."

"What?" asked Candy, a look of bewilderment on her face. "Is this man senile?!" she screamed. "I'm a live cut to a hostage taking, and some man walks up saying everything was fine in here until the police came?! RODNEY, get me my producer!" The camera man sprinted off with a look of terror on his face.

"Senile? Now young lady, I might be older, but I'm not senile," lectured the old man, obviously hurt. "You young people are..."

"Does anyone know what is happening here. WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING HERE?!" screamed Candy.

"I do," bellowed a voice from the back of the restaurant. The voice carried an authority that silenced the crowd.

"Well, then why don't you come over here to the camera and tell me," said Candy in a strangled voice.

"Okay," answered the man, and he walked up to the front. He had on a plaid shirt and a red bandana around his head. In his back pocket was a thick looking wallet.

"Now, speak into the mike, and I'll give you the questions. First, tell me what happened here at McDonald's on Foothill Road, and how you were involved."

"Honey," whispered Mrs. Henry to Eric, "could you pass me my diet coke."

"Yeah," Eric hissed, "but I'm trying to listen here, okay?"

"Sorry," snapped Mrs. Henry, "and the next time you talk to me like that young man, I'm going to tell your father."

"Right," mumbled Eric under his breath.

"Well," the man began, "basically, me and my friend, Steve, here, got up this morning and decided to rob the Toys R Us across the street."

"Jesus Christ," snapped Candy as she snatched back the mike.

"No, Ma'am," pleaded the man, "I'm not lying. Steve and I robbed that Toys R us over there and when we saw cops were following us we came in here to get cover, and we ordered food and all, and just stayed. But the cops outside never left, so we just waited. But these crazy people were just staying around, so we couldn't do anything."

"We weren't doing anything because there were all those cop cars outside, young man," said the Old Man. He was still angry about being called senile on live television.

"Is this true?" Candy asked the officer standing off to the side.

"What?" he asked. "Oh, yes, I believe it is. The assisitant manager barricaded himself in the basement and called us to tell us there was a hostage situation here, but he couldn't identify the attackers. When the other employees escaped they couldn't provide descriptions, either. One of them saw a man come in with a gun in his pocket but couldn't exactly describe him. I guess I grabbed the wrong guys," he added sheepishly, nodding toward the direction of the two handcuffed to one another behind the counter.

"So I'm standing here TALKING TO A MAN WITH A GUN?" screamed Candy.

"Yes, that's right," crooned the policeman, getting more comfortable in front of the camera. "Absolutely right Candy, and we're...." suddenly realizing where he was, "...WE'RE GOING TO ARREST HIM."

"ARREST HIM?" shouted the middle-aged man. "Don't you think you've arrested enough people for today? I'm telling ya everything was fine, FINE, until you and your buddies here decided to come get some action at the neighborhood McDonald's." Wild applause followed his words. "And another thing—if we want to sit here for seven hours, it's our God-given..."

"He's getting away!" screamed one of the other officers. The crowd ran to the window. The man and his accomplice were forcing the outside cops to cuff them as they clamored on to the paddy wagon. "These people are nuts!" he screamed frantically to Candy as they sped off, "just plain wackos."

The people in the restaurant weren't too happy about that. Even Eric felt his fur ruffled. "Like that one dude said," Eric later explained to Danny as they stood in line for another round of Big Macs, "if we want to sit here for seven hours it's out own god-damn business."