

That's what friends are for

by Billy Russo

One night last month I was playing my favorite video game and sipping coffee at a gas station/grocery/video store near the VA hospital where I work. I can be found there most evenings after completing my shift in the VA kitchen where I wash dishes. I play one or two rounds of "Mr. Do," drink one or two cups of coffee, and head for home.

I'm well-known in this family-run business,



The Roseburg Report

I was an established fixture in the little store long before the current owners and all their employees came along. Anyone looking for me in the early evening knows they can find me there.

This particular evening the young man who works the graveyard shift came staggering in. He had obviously been drinking. Greeting his co-worker loudly, he disappeared behind the counter.

Soon I heard his loud voice: "You dirty, no-good faggot..." I looked up from my game into blurry-eyed arrogance glaring at me from behind the counter ten feet away. If he was standing next to me when he said it, I would probably have felt threatened, but since he put the counter that houses the microwave oven and the popcorn popper between us, I didn't feel that he was an immediate threat. Also the clerk on duty, another teenager, was visibly embarrassed by this homophobic outburst, and he succeeded in distracting his co-worker. I thought, "how boring," and continued playing my game.

A few minutes later one of my co-workers, Kenny, came in looking for me. Kenny — like me — is in his middle thirties. The word that comes to mind when I think of Kenny is "mean." He has a short fuse which has caused him a few problems in the workplace, as shop steward I have helped him get out of some of the trouble his temper has gotten him into. His temper rules him, and even in the best of moods he's still very belligerent.

He started to ask me a question about an upcoming work-related investigation when the young homophobe started up again: "Faggot, queer, cocksucker," he called out to me. He gave my coworker a contemptuous glance, then faded back into the background as the embarrassed clerk distracted him again.

Kenny gave me a look of total disbelief. He had never been on the receiving end of homophobia before. And although he has been around me at work where I'm well accepted, this was his first experience with me outside that safe environment. He was very uncomfortable. I smiled at his discomfort and said in a reassuring tone, "You see what

happens when you're seen with me in public?" And gesturing flamboyantly I added, "You're gonna get a bad reputation." He was not amused.

We resumed our conversation about work and quickly forgot about the youth. But it wasn't long before he was back again, this time he appeared on our side of the counter. Facing Kenny with total contempt on his young face he jabbed his finger in Kenny's face and snarled, "You hang around him. You must be queer, too!"

Kenny had his arms at his side, alternately clenching his fists and flexing his fingers. He was breathing hard and his eyes were actually bulging. I had never seen him this angry; and what happened next surprised even me.

Instead of taking the young man by surprise with a kick to the groin or some other form of fisticuffs, he started screaming at the boy: "I'm no fucking queer!" he raged. Pointing an accusing finger at me, he continued, "I'm not like him..."

"My, oh my," I thought. I could see the color drain out of the younger homophobe's face as he realized he had bitten off more than he could chew. He backed off and quickly disappeared.

Too angry to say anything else, Kenny stormed out of the store and rode away on his motorcycle. The young homophobe remained in the store but didn't have any fire left in him. I went back to my video game.

The next day in the locker room I was changing into my uniform when Kenny came in. He hates work and almost always starts the day by kicking over a chair or two. There were some men playing cards at a nearby table and a couple of guys reading the daily paper and smoking cigarettes.

Kenny stopped dead in his tracks and groaned, "Oh, oh," when I said in a loud voice to a man on the other side of the locker room, "Would you believe me if I told you that two men got into a fight over me last night?"

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