

NAMES

“Hey, Joey, tell me something. Is Vince a ‘made’ guy ... you know ... connected?”

“Looking at Tommy McMichael, “Uncle” Joey chuckles. “What gives you that idea, kid?”

“...well think about it ... everyone calls him “Bullets.” I mean, look at Vinnie, silver-grey swept straight back... the sharkskin suit ... white on white shirt and tie, Italian loafers. C’mon last time I saw someone looked like that, a guy named Sonny had a bad day at a tollbooth?”

The rest of the guys around the table chuckle and shake their heads. Seems it’s a question they’ve heard before ...

... Hi, I’m Tony Baggz. We’re here at Sam’s ... a combination coffeehouse, sandwich shop, and bakery. Samantha Bates and her husband Dave built the place five years ago, but just as they opened it, she lost him to cancer. It’s the gang’s favorite morning hang out, probably because Sam’s has the best coffee and pastries on the south side of town. Well, that and Sam is one lovely lady; a tall, strawberry blonde with a voice like an angel. A nicer person you’ll never meet.

This morning we find “Uncle” Joey, Sammy “Bagels”, Jack “Gumshoe” Farrell, Mike “the Russian”, “Crazy Pat” Flanagan and young Tommy McMichael at the front window table. Tommy’s a fireman and works for Pat. He’s six foot five; two hundred fifty five pounds ... all muscle. He came to the University from Colorado, and stayed after graduation. The guys call him “Mountain.” Well, except for Bagels. You see Sammy’s only five foot four and on the first day he met Tommy he dubbed him, “the Giant Gentile.” Both Sammy and Tommy find it funny so that one stuck too.

Tommy attends Med School at the University ... studying to be a surgeon. It’s a grind, but Doc Rogers is sponsoring him and has helped with some scholarships and Pat works his schedule around his course work. This morning Tommy has a few hours off and joined the gang for coffee. Seeing Vince crossing the street prompts his question ... one I think he’s been wondering for a while now.

Let’s listen in....

“Hey Vince, sit down, you look tired,” Bagels says, pulling out a chair.

“Thanks, Sammy ... I’m beat ... game went to overtime last night. Didn’t get home ‘til one.”

“Sipping his coffee, Gumshoe looks across the table at this Italian friend. “Yo, Vinnie, you put a contract out on anyone lately?” he says in an over-the-top Jersey accent.

“Why, Jack ... need someone whacked?”

“Naaah ... just our friend here is wondering if you’re ... you know...”

Vince turns to Tommy. “Yo, mountain, you need someone clipped?”

Picking up a cinnamon roll, Tommy chuckles. “Nah, Vinnie, I was just wondering where ‘Bullets’ came from. I mean, word on the street is that you’re ... you know...”

Amused at Tommy’s discomfort with his own question, Vinnie laughs softly. “Okay, kid ... fair enough. Truth is I was with the Marines in Vietnam ... a munitions officer. My job was to make sure everyone had enough ammunition. One day, a kid in our battalion everyone called “Montana” dubbed me Captain ‘Bullets’. It stuck.”

Tommy smiles. “Fair enough ... Bullets.” Satisfied, he turns to his other friends. “Okay, how ‘bout the rest of you? Mike, why ‘Mike the Russian?’”

“Simple. My great grandfather came from Russia. Family name was Rustakov ... he shortened it to Rust. Guess he thought it sounded more ‘American’.”

“Okay. Jack, why ‘Gumshoe?’”

“Well kid, like Vince I was in Vietnam ... Naval Intelligence. When I came home I started a detective agency. One day, Bagels there calls me ‘Gumshoe’ ... slang for detective. It stuck too.”

A hint of laughter in his eyes, Tommy looks at the man chomping on a cherry blintz. “Sammy, why ‘Bagels?’”

“Hey, every Presbyterian kid loves bagels, right?”

“Before or after the 10 a.m. Sunday service?”

“Well, at St Ed’s, I was the only Jewish kid in the class,” Sammy says, chuckling softly. “One weekend I went home and brought back a sack of bagels.” Nodding in the direction of several of the guys sitting around the table, Sammy smiles. “These guys looted the bag and from then on, voila, ‘Bagels’.”

“Okay, how about Mr. Kossarides ... “the Human Tarantula?” Where’d that come from?”

“Nick ... there’s a good one ... again, college,” says Sammy. “Nick would shimmy up the walls in the dorm like a spider and pounce on whoever walked through the door. Scared the pants off everyone at one time or another.”

“Lucky, he didn’t die the night he pounced on Marilyn,” Mike says, sipping his coffee.

Gumshoe chuckles at his friend’s irritation. “You know Mike; he wanted to do it again at your wedding. I was going to let him, but Joey talked him out of it.”

“You’re kidding. Seriously? Then I woulda’ whacked him.”

“Let it go Mike,” Joey says, laughing at his friend’s irritation.

Tommy looks at his boss. “Why do they call you ‘Crazy Pat’?”

“Well, some people have called me crazy for some things I’ve done while fighting a fire.”

“Yea, Tommy, that man’s so crazy he’s saved at least a dozen lives in the past ten years,” Mike says, nodding in Pat’s direction. “Your boss is a red, white, and blue hero in this town.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tommy says, looking at his boss with a newfound admiration. He pauses for a minute and then continues. “How about the others?”

“Well Bobby Prestrelski is “Pretzels,” Gumshoe says. “That one’s obvious. Jerry Gordon is “Fog” because he’s always walking around in one. At least according to his wife, Holly. Then there’s the Spinelli brothers. We just call them one, two, and three ... in order of age. Carmine is one, he’s the oldest, Vito’s next, number two, and Nunzio’s the youngest ... number three.”

Gumshoe sips his coffee. “Who else, Mike?” he asks.

“Well, Walt Robinson is ‘hammer’, he’s a carpenter by trade. Darryl Martinson is ‘ace.’ He was as a fighter pilot in the service. And of course there’s ‘Floater’, ‘Ski’, ‘Barracuda’, ‘Fabian’ and a few others. You’ll meet ‘em all sooner or later.”

“How about the clergymen ... any of them have nicknames?”

“All of them,” Bagels says. “They use them among themselves, but out of respect, we don’t. What we will do, though, is mix up their titles. They get a kick out of it. We’ll call Father Bob, ‘Rabbi,’ Pastor Randall, ‘padre,’ ... things like that.”

Gentle laughter escapes Joey's lips. "My favorite was Pastor Swanson's reaction when we first called him, 'your holiness', he says. "Guess it was a little too Catholic for him. Everyone got a kick out of it. Even Billy finds it funny now."

"But just to satisfy your curiosity," Mike says with a grin. "Reverend Jacobson is called 'Jake'. Again, obvious. Then there's Fr. Bob. He's 'Riff.'"

Tommy starts to ask why, but Mike cuts him off.

"I know, why Riff? Well, back in the sixties, before he became a priest, Fr. Bob belonged to a gang in the Bronx. Riff is one of the characters in the musical, *West Side Story*, about a couple of gangs in New York City, and for the fun of it, the guys hung that one on him..."

"How about Rabbi, Green?"

"Sheckles ... or sometimes preacherman."

Seeing the question in Tommy's eyes, Mike nods his head. "To explain ... it's a combination ... the fact that he wins at poker during the 'financial meetings' and rakes in the shekels as he calls them, and he has a killer sense of humor. The man knows his way around a one liner so we were thinking of 'chuckles.' So together ... Sheckles."

"Reverend Williams?"

"Darth Vader."

Tommy chuckles. "Let me guess, his voice, like the character in the movie."

"Exactly," says Bagels, "can't get anything past the Giant Gentile."

Shaking his head, Tommy grins at his diminutive friend. "How about Pastor Randall?" he asks.

"'Railbird'," Sammy says. John loves to watch horse racing ... he's been know to wager a few bucks on the Triple Crown races. Still has his winning ticket on Secretariat from the Derby in '73. Carries it in his wallet ... calls it his good luck charm. He doesn't go to the track often, though. Thinks it would be a bad example to his flock."

"Reverend Daniels?"

"Professor."

"Yea, I can see that one. Pastor Swanson?"

"Walk off."

“Walk off?” Tommy says, a puzzled look on his face.

“Well, when he was younger, Billy played triple A pro ball in the minors ... could have made it to ‘the show’; he was that good. But he tore up a knee and that ended his baseball career. One night he told us his biggest thrill was playing in a preseason game with the big club. Hit a ‘walk off’ home run in the bottom of the 11th to win a game. So ... walk off.”

Laughing softly, Tommy shakes his head. “You guys would give God a nickname.”

“We have; we call him ‘The Boss’,” Bagels says, a devilish look in his eyes.

Gumshoe looks over at Vince. “That reminds me, Bullets, you need to talk to Springsteen about changing that nickname of his.”

Everyone chuckles as Jack lowers his voice to a more ominous tone....

“... and make him an offer he can’t refuse ...”

“I have called you each by name.”

So, what’s in a name, beyond simply a word? Well, names are sacred ... especially to God. Not only His, but ours. Names are to be revered, to be honored; so much so that two of God’s ten laws etched in stone tablets demand just that. One; we keep God’s name sacred, another; we accord the same honor and respect to the names of others. And our own. Why? Because all men and women are made in God’s own image; an image that demands we recognize in all the same dignity and honor we see in God, and ourselves.

Every name is sacred to God. Ask yourself, in your daily comings and goings, by your words and actions, do you insult the names of others ... bring dishonor to your own ...

... and offend God Himself?

...Thinkaboutit I’m Tony Baggz...