

The Hot Corner

“C’mon ladies ... this isn’t a sale at Missy’s ... let’s see some hustle out there...”

“... A sale at Missy's? ... heck, Skip, I'd outrun those bulls in Spain for that,” laughs the first baseman, a tall, willowy blonde named Megan.

Standing at home plate, the batter, tall and lanky, sporting faded jeans, a ball cap and navy-blue windbreaker prominently featuring the emblem of the New York Yankees, and silver and black Reeboks, chuckles softly to himself.

“Well, Stretch, it'd probably be the fastest you’ve ever run,” he barks.

Covering her mouth with her glove, an impish smile lights up Megan’s eyes. “Slave Driver ...” she murmurs loud enough to evoke a giggle from Katie, the second baseman.

Skip hits another ground ball up the middle. Ricocheting off the pitcher's mound, it scoots past the shortstop's feeble attempt to snag it. Shaking his head, again he scolds his infielders.

“... aahhh ... c’mon girls ... my sweet, little, ‘ole grandma could've caught that.”

“... oh yea ... let me guess ... sweet, little, ‘ole granny’s named Derek Jeter?” Stretch hollers back, to the laughter of the other infielders.

Glaring at his first baseman, Skip growls under his breath, the ferocity of his demeanor betrayed by the laughter in his eyes. Truth be known, Skip treasures all “his girls.”

Tugging the brim of her cap and softly pounding the palm of her glove with her throwing hand, Aliana, the third baseman, looks down the line at the batter. “Hey Skip ... you swing like a girl. The way you hit, I could play third base in a little black cocktail dress and heels.”

Taking the bait, “Mr. Reeboks” hits a screamer to third. “...Oh yea, ‘Brighteyes’ ... don't forget the pearls.”

Taking two quick steps to her right, “Al” backhands the ball on the short hop and sidearms the throw to first. A cheer goes up from the other players as she straightens up and smiles at the batter. “... just like they do it in Yankee Stadium, right Skip?”

Slowly shaking his head, a mischievous grin lights up Skip’s face. “Ahh, I still say you throw like a girl,” he hollers back.

And, collectively, the infielders roll their eyes ...

Hi ... my name’s Anthony Baggadontz ... friends call me “Tony Baggz” ... welcome to our neighborhood. It’s a Tuesday evening in early February here at Bill Morgan Park. You know, one of the great things about this city is this domed stadium ... it’s open year-round. Actually, it was once owned by the city’s professional baseball team - around here we call them “the Boys in Black.” They used to play here until they outgrew it. But instead of tearing the place down, the team’s owners, the O’Grady family, reached an agreement with the city to save it for the citizens to use. So now little leagues, men's and women’s adult leagues, high school and college teams all call it home. And even though it's a winter evening, the ladies are getting in some practice ... and some exercise.

Billy Swanson manages the neighborhood team in the city women's softball league. The pastor of the Liberty Street Assembly of God, “Skip,” as the girls on his team call him, is in his mid-thirties, though he looks younger. Billy thinks they asked him to coach because he knows the game of baseball. Actually, it’s because they think he’s cute. I know ... I overheard them one evening at Baldy’s after practice. But his conviction isn't without merit. Before he entered the ministry, “Walk Off”, as many of his other friends call him, played pro ball for the Yankees triple A minor league club. He hit a “walk off” home run in a pre-season exhibition game against the Bucs to win it in the bottom of the eleventh inning ... hence, the nickname. From what I’ve heard, Billy could have made it to “the show” if it wasn’t for a serious knee injury. He was that good. But ... it seems like Someone had

other plans.

Out beyond left field behind what used to be the visitor's bull pen, hidden from view - or so he thinks - Tommy McMichael leans against the stands. Nicknamed "Mountain," he's originally from Colorado and several years ago came to the city to attend the university, fell in love with the place and the people, and never left. A fireman at Southside Company 5 and an expert EMT, he's in his second year of Medical school.

Now the neighborhood here on the Southside boasts a tight-knit group of friends, most of whom grew up within a few miles of each other. One of the guys, Doctor Norman Rogers, the Chief of Thoracic Surgery at the University Medical Center, is Tommy's mentor and biggest supporter. Doc arranged for a scholarship and runs interference for Tommy with administration, helping him keep his job and attend school. Fortunately, Tommy's aptitude for his course work and the fact that he carries a perfect grade point average makes things easier. The kid's cut out to be a doctor.

Tommy's worked at Company 5 both as an undergrad and for his first two years of med school. Because of the nature of his course work, he'll be on inactive status for his next year and then back on an as-needed basis his fourth year. He lives in a small apartment over the firehouse and his boss lets him work his schedule around his course work. Oh, and for good measure, on a couple of evenings and Sunday afternoons in the summer, he coaches a pee wee baseball team of six-and seven-year-old boys. So ball parks are a favorite stomping ground of his.

He's a big guy ... about six foot five, dark shaggy hair, hazel eyes that come alive when he laughs, broad shoulders, and a chiseled jaw that I swear could shave ice ... solid as a rock. Probably weighs about two fifty or so. He has a rugged look about him ... kinda reminds me of an old seventies movie actor ... a guy named Charles Bronson ... or maybe John Wayne ... take your pick. However, watch him with the tykes on his pee wee ball team and it's not hard to see a side of him that's really a big teddy bear ... the guy loves kids.

But tonight it's not baseball that's on his mind ... it's Billy's third baseman. Not that Tommy's a fool; Nick Kossarides' daughter, Aliana, makes the "hot corner" a whole lot hotter. A long-haired brunette, a smidge under five foot ten with beautiful green eyes, Aliana is of Greek and European heritage, though the family is third- generation American. With

classically beautiful features and a marvelous figure, it would be easy to mistake her for a high fashion model. Yet, she teaches third grade in a local public school and, like Tommy, she loves children. Al, as most people call her, is one of the most genuinely friendly people you'll ever meet. Conceit is one term no one would ever associate with her. As beautiful as she is, you won't meet a more "down-to-earth" young woman. And she and Tommy aren't exactly strangers. They know each other casually, having worked together several times on the Interfaith Council of Churches' kid's carnivals and yard sales. But from the look on Tommy's face, it's not hard to see he might like "casual" to be something more.

He's been hanging out there for maybe fifteen minutes, lost in his thoughts. So much so, he doesn't hear Rabbi Joshua Green approaching. The rabbi is the leader of Temple Beth El, the Reform congregation a couple of blocks over. Known for his sharp mind and, sometimes, sharper tongue, his friends in the clergy call him "Shecky" after an old-time comedian. Possessed of a keen sense of humor, a profound sense of the absurd, plus an ever-present twinkle in his eye, the rabbi knows his way around a one-liner and, knowing Josh, this encounter promises to be interesting.

What do you say we listen in? ...

"... Let me guess, Mountain ... third base?"

Startled by the sound of the rabbi's voice, Tommy turns and shakes his head as the man of the cloth slides into a nearby seat.

"Oh ... hi, Rabbi ... you surprised me" A mischievous look lights up Tommy's eyes. "Here, hold on a minute, let me jump start my heart," he says, playfully thumping his chest.

Chuckling softly at Tommy's jest, Josh nods in the direction of the infield. "Let me take another guess ... Aliana?"

Looking down the third base line, the laughter in Tommy's eyes fades to a more thoughtful look. "Ah, well ... you know ... I'm just..."

“Yea, yea, yea ... I know ... you’re just a fan ... and I’m Shaquille O’Neal.”

“The Shaq?” Tommy says, shaking his head, a sly smile returning to his eyes. “You know, Rabbi, for a moment there, I thought there was a resemblance. But now that I look closer ... naahhh ... no way ... you’re too short and you probably can’t dunk.”

Turning his attention back to the field, Tommy watches Aliana field a foul pop up. “By the way, your holiness, what are you doing here anyway?”

“Well, see the young lady out in right field ... her name's Diane,” Josh says, still chuckling at Tommy’s jest. “She’s a friend of my son, Seth ... his latest girlfriend, I think. Anyway, he brought her to the house for dinner last week and she said to stop by and say hello sometime. Since I was working late and the synagogue’s only a few blocks over, I figured ... why not? Besides, I've always been curious about this team Billy brags so much about. But back to the question at hand, how’s Aliana?”

“Oh ... okay ... I guess ...”

“You ask her out yet?”

Pausing for a moment, a faraway look clouds Tommy’s eyes.

I think the question took him by surprise.

“... aaahh, Rabbi ... she doesn’t even know I exist.”

“Rubbish, Tommy ... heck, it was her dad who told me you hang around practice. C’mon, where do you think he heard that? Trust me, she knows ... they all do.”

“Yea ... well...”

“Well nothing. You think they don't know you're here? I hate to tell you, but you're more obvious than a giraffe at a dog show.”

Pausing, Josh clasps him on the shoulder. “My friend, it's time you stepped up to the plate ... and not with a bat, if you know what I mean.”

The skeptical look in Tommy's eyes tells me he's not convinced.

“C'mon Rabbi, look at me ... I'm twenty five, I'm a fireman, I live in a tiny apartment over a firehouse, and I'm always broke. I go to school days and nights ... in addition to my job.”

“So?”

“So look at the guys hanging around her ... high society ... money, silk suits, those fancy Italian loafers, sports cars, expensive restaurants, polo ponies and country clubs ... someone like Aliana deserves those things and I can't compete with that ... or them. Heck, a medium pepperoni pizza and a couple beers at Spinelli's is about as fancy as I can get. For me to take her to the places she's used to, I'd have to work a half dozen overtime shifts ... besides, where would I find the time?”

A chuckle escapes the Rabbi's lips. “Polo ponies? Tommy, you're making a mistake way too many people make,” he says, watching Diane track down a fly ball. “You're letting the things you don't have hold you back.”

“I don't know ...” Tommy says, his voice hesitant, his words trailing off.

Josh smiles gently. “Besides, maybe she'd love a pepperoni pie and a beer ... so ask her, what's it gonna hurt?”

“My ego?”

“Ego ... schmego ... C'mon, kid we all know Nick's little girl. As first rate as Aliana is, she's pretty down to earth. Do you think fancy clothes, fine restaurants, and expensive cars are all she wants out of life ... you're telling me you think she's that shallow?”

“Well ... no ...!”

“Besides, my guess is you'd gladly put in those overtime shifts.”

Pausing a moment, a sly smile meanders across Tommy's face. “...Well, now that you mention it”

“Right! ... I knew you'd see my point. Besides, look at the two of you. She's an elementary school teacher ... she loves kids, especially little ones. So much so that she works with them in her free time. And you do too. How about that pee wee baseball team of yours, huh? And I've seen the two of you working the games at the kid's fair with Pete's son, Andy. You both love people. And you ... you're a fireman, you're going to med school ... you're going to be, what ... a brain surgeon?”

"Cardiac ... or maybe pediatrics ... haven't decided yet."

Returning his gaze to the ball field, Josh joins Tommy in watching the outfielders take some batting practice. "Tommy, you know who you are, what you want, and where you're going," he says after a moment's silence. “You have a plan for your life ... a vision, and, to me, that rates over a pair of Italian loafers any day. My guess ... it rates with Aliana too.”

“Yea, but ...”

“But nothing ... look, you and Al are Christians, right? You both go to the same church, if I'm correct?”

“Well, truth be told, she's a lot more observant than I am ... but yea, we go to the same church.”

“Okay, fair enough ... but that isn't my point. My point is the focus of your beliefs ... your Carpenter from Nazareth.”

Pausing, Josh follows Tommy's gaze toward the infield as Megan snags a

scorching line drive. Holding the ball aloft in her glove and taking a couple of exaggerated bows, an ear-to-ear grin splits her face as the rest of the team cheers in unison and doffs their caps in salute. And Skip ... well, he just laughs, drops his chin to his chest, and shakes his head.

Both men chuckle at Megan's antics as Josh continues his thought.

"Now, obviously, I don't share all your beliefs. But I am familiar with your written accounts of Him, and in reading them, I do recognize the qualities that made your Carpenter an extraordinary man. Your Jesus may have been the most assertive man who ever lived. There was no hesitation about Him ... no self-doubt ... He never questioned himself. He knew what He believed and wanted to accomplish, He never compromised Himself or His purpose. He was a man of integrity, compassion, and respect. Now I may not agree with you about Who He was, but I recognize what He was ... a strong man in the finest sense of the word. Your Carpenter was a babe magnet and too many of you Christian men fail to see that."

Shaking his head slowly, laughter creeps into the corners of Tommy's eyes as an incredulous look settles over his face. "A babe magnet? ... that's a first ... never heard Him called that, preacherman."

Grinning at Tommy's reaction, Josh nods in the direction of the young women on the baseball diamond. "You see, Tommy, that's what women look for in a man; self-assurance, a vision, and a purpose ... not just some guy drifting along, unsure of himself, what he's doing, and where he's going. Strong healthy women look for a man who goes after the things he wants in life and does everything in his power to get them. They always have. And today, too many women are starved for a man like that ... a man like your Carpenter."

Looking intently at the Rabbi, Tommy cocks his head ... you can see he's chewing on Josh's words.

"And they look for someone who shares their deepest beliefs ... things they're passionate about. Like I said, Aliana loves kids and so do you. She loves family. You do too; it's something I can tell."

“Yea...” Tommy says, his voice trailing off.

“Right. And another thing, she’s kindhearted ... compassionate. Just watch her with the folks who come through the doors of the Council for help. She’s a soft touch ... sometimes too soft, really.”

“Yea, I know ... but that’s one of the things I like about her.”

“Me too. We all do. Everyone who knows Aliana likes that about her. And to be honest, you’re not all that different. I watch you with Andy ... how you look out for him, how you help him work around the fire station. Heck, most people run from a kid with Down Syndrome like Andy ... you treat him like he's your long lost brother. All the guys in the neighborhood are impressed with that, especially her dad ... And I'm sure she is, too.”

Tommy looks over the Josh's shoulder, a faraway look in his eyes ... the look of a man trying to reconcile conflicting thoughts.

Seeing Aliana approach, the Rabbi’s eyes sparkle. “Like I said, kid ... she knows ... it’s time to step up to the plate, my friend,” he says softly, looking over Tommy’s shoulder and smiling at Billy’s third baseman.

A tap on his shoulder interrupts Tommy’s thoughts. Turning his head, he finds Aliana standing behind him. “Oh ... um ... hi, Aliana ... didn’t hear you coming,” he says, turning to face her.

“Gotta go, I’ll leave you two to yourselves ... good luck, kid,” Josh says, winking at Tommy and heading for the gate.

“Thanks, Rabbi,” Tommy says.

A puzzled look crosses Aliana’s face. “Good luck ... what'd the Rabbi mean by that?” she says, “... good luck with what?”

“Oh, nothing. We were just talking about work ... med school ... things like that.” Looking into her eyes, he holds her gaze for a second longer than the

moment calls for ... as if he's seeing something for the first time. A gentle smile spreads across his face. "... Something you need, Aliana?"

"Oh, yea ... Denise wanted me to ask you to ask Paul to call her later tonight. She's been out all day and needs to talk to him ... I don't know ... something about Saturday night. You work with him, right?"

"Aaah, yea ... sure ... be happy to."

She gently touches his forearm and flashes a fabulous smile. "Thanks, Tommy ... you're a sweetheart."

As she turns to go Tommy catches her elbow, stopping her.

"Aliana, got a minute ... I was wondering ... there's a play Saturday evening at the Dinner Theatre out at St. Ed's. Father Bob offered me a couple tickets ... dinner and a show ... what do you say? ...

... if you're free ... umm ... maybe you'd like to ..."

...Way to go, Tommy! I don't know about you, but I'm looking forward to seeing what happens next. Looking at the two of them, they would make a striking couple.

You know ... the Rabbi's right. It is the mark of a strong man to know who he is, what he wants in life, and what he needs to do to get it. And then to pursue it with a passion. It's something women look for in a man. Assertive is appealing.

There's something else we all should see in the Carpenter from Nazareth, as the Rabbi calls Him. Something we often overlook. Over time, unintentionally perhaps, the pundits of Christian religion, especially the artists, all too often have taken this powerful, self-assured man and in their various and sundry portraits, turned Him into some ghostly apparition; appearing effeminate, meek, and frail, with a wispy beard, a pasty complexion, and a haunted, far away look about Him. Add in the ridicule of

pop culture and, all too often, our Carpenter has been turned into a caricature that's laughable ... if it wasn't so sad. So for a moment, let's set the idea of divinity aside and simply look at the man ...

“... Ecce homo ...” as Pilate said to the mob.

Reading Scripture, it isn't hard to see the strong, self-assured, compassionate man of whom the Rabbi speaks. We see kindness and concern for the helpless and the downtrodden, mercy for the wrongdoer, patience and tolerance for the foe, love for the friend, and an unyielding resolve to complete what He came to accomplish. Vision, determination, understanding, patience, mercy, kindness, and love ... all marks of a strong man.

And Jesus was a working man, a carpenter, a builder ... long before hydraulic lifts, pre-fab housing and Home Depot. His daily bread was earned with the strength of His body, the sweat of His brow, and the keen working of His mind. It's not hard to picture Him alongside Joseph in the Galilean sunshine, talking, laughing, sweating, and at the end of the day, tired in that good way a man feels after an honest hard day's work. Jesus, the man, was proud in His bearing ... a pride matched by the physical strength of His body. I picture a man with the physique of a pro football linebacker; a physical presence that matches the strength of His vision, His conviction, His passion, and His love ...

... it's an image men need to see ... and to emulate ... and something women want and need to find in the men in their lives today ...

... A babe magnet as the Rabbi called him ...

...Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz