

FOREWARD

Adam took a nap and the world was made whole.

According to Genesis, The Creator brings the heavens, the earth, and all life into existence. And, seeing all He has made is good, takes the final step. Gathering the dust of the earth – one version of Scripture calls it the “slime” of the earth* – He breathes His very life into it, forming a unique creature and endowing it with something no other has. An immortal soul. ***GOD’S OWN IMAGE AND LIKENESS!!*** The living embodiment of His love. His creativity, intelligence, and independence, His wisdom, truth, and justice, His mercy, compassion, goodness, and joy. God forms a being eternally precious to Himself. One made expressly to live forever with Him.

He creates Man ... Adam.

The Creator gives Adam dominion over the earth. Yet, despite the endless magnificence enveloping him, Adam remains incomplete. So the Creator fills the void; making a partner for him. And in doing so, something remarkable happens. God shifts gears. He creates this partner, unlike all life - including Adam himself - not from a matrix of energy or elements or chemicals, or simply another shovel of dirt, but rather from the only living being eternally loved and eternally precious to Himself. He creates woman from man. Not as an alter ego, a servant, or a plaything, but as a complement, a standard of excellence by which a man measures himself and makes his ultimate statement about the values on which he has formed his character and built his life.

He makes for Adam a wife ... Eve.

And recognizing this exalted dignity, it is implicit that, to her Creator, she certainly is not an afterthought.

The rabbis of the Talmud and the sages of the early centuries understood this. A truth not lost on those wise men, they felt a duty to preserve it for posterity. A vision that, while today sadly seems to have been relegated to the back roads of society’s consciousness, thankfully, has not been lost to mankind.

A cancer is growing in today’s world; a malignant relativism that scoffs at absolute principles of good and evil, right and wrong, and bestows its blessing

on almost any form of self-indulgent and disordered behavior in which people choose to indulge. Constantly we hear voices attacking traditional marriage and the nuclear family as tedious, irrelevant, or simply, obsolete. And increasingly those who stand tall in defense of those sacred institutions are muffled, stifled, and silenced.

Many claim all life, mankind included, devoid of value and purpose ordered by a supreme intelligence and an eternal design, crawled out of the soup of some primordial swamp. Given the drift of today's society and the growing disdain with which many regard those traditional values that are the foundation of the individual, marriage, and the family, one might well believe much of mankind is trying to crawl back in...

... and if so, might it be time that the lesson of those wise men of yesteryear be resurrected from the graveyard of neglect into which those time-honored truths have been discarded? For as the story of mankind unfolds, there will be points of light, those souls of spiritual integrity and moral strength who strive to realize the vision the Creator intended when He gave Eve to Adam.

The following pages are Tommy and Aliana's story. From its hesitant beginning, the tale follows an elementary school teacher, who happens to be an outstanding third baseman, and a firefighter on a path to becoming a top-notch surgeon. A young man and woman who find in each other qualities that compel them to look further into a relationship having the potential to become far more than merely a casual friendship. And in that exploration discover in the other the ultimate expression of their deepest, most-cherished values. In doing so, they come to understand the necessity of choosing between the alternatives. A transient and ultimately meaningless liaison built on and justified only by the whim and the pleasure of the moment, or a place of joy, a safe harbor where each is confident of the love of the other. Love, a sacred, divine energy - an eternal gift of the Creator - one that elevates man and woman to their unique position in all creation, and a safe harbor, a shelter in the heart and soul of the other, built on principles that have served mankind well since Adam took that nap.

Tommy and Aliana invite you along on their journey.

The Hot Corner

“C’mon ladies, this ain’t a sale at Missy’s. Let’s see some hustle out there.”

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

Standing at home plate, the batter, tall and lanky, wearing faded jeans, silver and black Reeboks, and sporting a ball cap and navy blue windbreaker featuring the Big Apple’s team emblem, chuckles softly to himself. “Well, Stretch, it’d probably be the fastest you’ve ever run,” he barks.

Covering her mouth with her glove, a mischievous smile lights up Megan’s eyes. “Slave Driver,” she murmurs loud enough to evoke a giggle from 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 then softly pounding the palm of her glove, the third baseman, Aliana Kossarides, looks down the line at the batter. “Hey Skip, you swing like a girl,” she laughs. “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 erupts from her teammates as she straightens up and smiles. “Just like they do it in Yankee Stadium, right Skip?”

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

And, collectively, the ladies roll their eyes.

Hi ... my name's Anthony Baggadontz. My 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. Once owned by the city's professional football and baseball teams – around here we call them "the Boys in Black" - they played here until they outgrew it. But instead of tearing the place down, the teams' owners, the O'Grady family, reached an agreement with the city to save it for the citizens. So now little leagues, adult leagues, high school and college teams, all call it home. And even though it's a mid-winter's evening, the ladies are getting in some practice.

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 call him, is in his mid-thirties, though he looks younger. Billy thinks they asked him to coach because he knows the game. Actually, it's because of his reddish blonde hair and dimples. Yep, 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 New York's triple A minor league club. He hit a "walk off*" home run in a pre-season exhibition game to win it in the bottom of the eleventh inning. Hence, the nickname. Billy could have made it to "the show" if it wasn't for a serious knee injury. He was that good. But it seems Someone had other plans.

Out beyond left field, hidden from view - or so he thinks - Tommy McMichael leans against the grandstands. Nicknamed "Mountain" and originally from Gunbarrel, Colorado, Tommy came to the city several years ago 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 also in his second year of Medical school.

Now the neighborhood here boasts a tight-knit group of friends, most of whom grew up in these parts. One, doctor Norman "Heartbeat" Rogers, the Chief of Thoracic Surgery at the University Medical Center, is Tommy's mentor and biggest supporter. As our story unfolds, you'll see that nicknames are big around here. However, out of respect, the guys rarely use Norm's and simply call him, "Doc."

Anyway, Doc arranged 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 his perfect grade point average make things easier. The kid's cut out to be a doctor.

Tommy's worked at Company 5 as an undergrad and for his first two years of med school. He has a small apartment over the firehouse and his boss, "Crazy Pat," works 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. Seems Tommy played four years of college level baseball himself. 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 you would swear could shave ice. Solid as a rock. He 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 ball teams and it's easy to see a side of him that's really a big teddy bear. The guy loves kids.

But tonight it's not baseball 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 tall, long-haired brunette with beautiful green eyes, Aliana is of Greek and European heritage, though the family is third-generation American. Classically beautiful, it would be easy to mistake her for a high fashion model. Yet, she teaches third grade in a local school, is working on her Master's degree in Education, and, like Tommy, she loves kids. "Al," as most people call her, is one of the friendliest and most down-to-earth young women you'll ever meet. And she and Tommy aren't exactly strangers. They know each other casually, having worked together on the Interfaith Council of Churches' kid's carnivals and yard sales. But judging from the look in Tommy's eyes, it's easy to see he'd like "casual" to be something more.

He's been hanging out for maybe fifteen minutes, lost in thought. So much so, he doesn't hear Rabbi Joshua Green approaching. The rabbi is the leader of Temple Beth El, the Reform congregation a few blocks over. Known for his keen sense of humor, sharp mind, and sometimes sharper tongue, his friends in the clergy have dubbed him "Sheckles." Possessing 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.

So, now that you've been introduced ... what do you say, let's listen in? ...

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

Startled, Tommy turns and shakes his head as the rabbi, all five foot six of him, slides into a nearby seat. "Oh hi, 'preacherman' ... you surprised me. Here, hold on, let me jump start my heart," he says, laughing and playfully thumping his chest.

Chuckling softly, Josh nods in the direction of the infield. "Let me take another guess. Aliana?"

The laughter in Tommy's eyes fades. "Ah, well you know, I'm just ..." he says, his words trailing off leaving his thought unfinished.

"Yea, yea, I know, you're just a fan. And I'm Shaquille O'Neal.*"

Tommy leans forward, peering intently at Josh, a sly smile rising in his eyes. "The Shaq? You know, Rabbi, for a moment there, I thought I saw a resemblance," he says. "But now that I look closer ... naahhh, no way. You're too short and I bet you can't dunk." Pausing, Tommy turns his attention back to the field to watch Aliana field a 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, chuckling at Tommy's jest. "She's a friend of my son, Seth. 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 the synagogue's only a couple blocks over, I figured why not? Besides, I've always been curious about this team Billy brags about. But back to the question at hand, how's Aliana?"

"Oh ... okay, I guess."

"You ask her out yet?"

A faraway look clouds Tommy's eyes. "Aaahh, Rabbi, she doesn't even know I exist."

Shaking his head gently, the Rabbi chuckles softly. "Rubbish, Tommy," he says. "Heck, it was her dad who told me you hang around practice. C'mon, where'd 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 gorilla at a dog show.”

A devilish look lights up Tommy's eyes. “*A dog show! ... a dog show!!* Wait till they hear that,” he laughs, gesturing toward the field.

Momentarily flustered, Josh shakes his head. “I ... I didn't mean it that way.”

The devilish gleam lingers in his eyes as he winks at the man of the cloth. “Okay, Rabbi. I won't tell.”

Josh inclines his head toward Tommy; an impish grin crossing his face. “Thanks Tommy. You're a real mensch,*” he deadpans.

Pausing, both men laugh softly at the exchange. After a moment Josh sighs softly and looks down the third base line. “My friend, it's time you stepped up to the plate. And not with a bat, if you know what I mean.”

The look in Tommy's eyes says 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, I'm paying my way through med school, and I'm always broke. I have classes days and nights in addition to my job.”

“So?”

“So look at the guys hanging around her. Money, silk suits, those fancy Italian loafers, sports cars, polo ponies, country clubs. I can't compete with that. Or them. Heck, a medium pizza and a couple beers 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 dozen overtime shifts. Where would I find the time?”

“Polo ponies?” Josh says, chuckling and watching Diane track down a fly ball. “C'mon Mountain, you're making a mistake way too many people make. You're letting the things you don't have hold you back.”

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

“Besides, maybe she'd love a couple slices and a beer. Ask her, what's it gonna hurt?”

“My ego?”

“Ego, schmego. C’mon, kid, we all know Nick’s little girl. Fancy clothes and expensive cars, you think that’s all she cares about. She’s that shallow?”

“Well, no.”

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

“Well, now you mention it,” Tommy says, a sly smile meandering across his face.

“Right! Knew you'd see my point. Besides, look at the two of you. She’s a school teacher, she loves kids, especially little ones. And you do too. How about those ball teams of yours, huh? And the two of you working the Council’s kid's carnivals 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?”

“Don’t know. Ortho, maybe cardiac, or pediatric ... haven’t decided yet.”

Josh joins Tommy watching the outfielders take 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 that rates over Italian loafers any day. My guess, it rates with Aliana too.”

“Yea, but ...”

“But nothing. Look, you’re both Christians, right? You go to the same church?”

“Well, truth is, she’s a lot more observant than I am. But yea, we go to the same church.”

“Fair enough. But that’s not my point. My point is the focus of your belief, your Carpenter from Nazareth.”

Pausing momentarily, Josh follows Tommy’s gaze toward the infield as Megan snags a scorching line drive. Holding the ball aloft and taking several exaggerated bows, an ear-to-ear grin splits her face as the team cheers and doffs their caps in salute. Both men chuckle at her 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 I 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, his values, or his purpose. He was

a man of vision, integrity, compassion, and respect. As I said, I may not agree 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, an incredulous look washes over Tommy’s face. “A babe magnet? That’s a first. Never heard Him called that, preacherman.”

Grinning, Josh nods in the direction of the baseball diamond. “You see, Tommy, that’s what women look for in a man; self-assurance, a vision, 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 what he wants in life and does everything in his power to get it. 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 quietly, his voice trailing off.

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

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

“We all do. Everyone does. And you’re not all that different. I watch you with Andy. How you look out for him, help him work around the fire station. Heck, most people run from a kid with Down syndrome like Andy. You treat him like a long lost brother. All the guys are impressed with that, especially her dad. And I’m sure she is, too.”

Looking over Josh’s shoulder, a faraway look clouds Tommy’s eyes ... the look of a man trying to reconcile conflicting thoughts.

Seeing Aliana approach, Josh’s eyes sparkle. “Like I said, it’s time.”

A tap on his shoulder interrupts Tommy’s thoughts. Turning, he finds Billy’s third baseman standing behind him. “Oh ... um ... hi, Aliana ... didn’t hear you coming.”

“Gotta go, I’ll leave you two to yourselves. Good luck, Mountain,” Josh says, winking at Tommy.

“Thanks, Rabbi.”

“Good luck? What’d he mean by that?” Aliana asks, watching the rabbi walk away, a question in her eyes. “Good luck with what?”

“Oh, nothing. We were just talking about work, school ... things like that.” Looking into her eyes, he holds her gaze for a second longer than the moment calls for. “Something you need, Aliana?”

“Oh, yea. Denise wanted me to ask you to ask Paul to call her later. Something about Saturday night.”

“Aaah, yea, sure ... be happy to.”

Gently touching his forearm, she smiles. “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 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 pursue it with a passion. It's something women seek in a man. Assertive is appealing.

There's something else we should see in the Carpenter from Nazareth, as Rabbi Josh calls Him. Something we often overlook. Over time, the pundits of religion, especially the artists, all too often have taken this powerful, self-assured man and turned Him into some ghostly apparition; meek and frail, with a wispy beard, pasty complexion, and a haunted, far-away look. 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 a strong, self-assured, compassionate man. 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. 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 sweat of His brow and the working of His mind. It's not hard to picture Him alongside Joseph talking, laughing, sweating, and at the end of the day, tired in that good way a man feels after an honest day's hard work. Jesus, the man, was proud in His bearing, a pride matched by His physical strength. I picture a man with 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 emulate. And something women want and need to find in the men in their lives today ...

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

