

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 ... everyone calls him ‘Bullets.’ I mean, look at him, silver-grey hair swept straight back... the sharkskin suit ... white on white shirt and tie, Italian loafers. Last time I saw someone looked like that; a guy named Sonny had a bad day at a tollbooth.”

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

Hi, I’m Tony Baggz. We’re here at Samantha’s Bistro, 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 ... cancer. It’s the gang’s favorite morning hang out, probably because Sam’s has, maybe, the best coffee and pastries in town. Plus, Sam herself 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. Hailing from Gunbarrel, Colorado, the guys call him “Mountain.” Except for Bagels. You see, Sammy’s only five foot four, and the first time he met Tommy, he dubbed him, “the Giant Gentile.” Both men find it funny so that stuck too.

Tommy attends Med School at the University. It’s a grind, but Doc Rogers is sponsoring him 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 walking in prompts his question ...

...let's listen in....

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

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

“Sipping his coffee, Gumshoe laughs softly. “Yo, Vinnie, you put a contract out on anyone lately?” he asks in an over-the-top Jersey accent.

“Why, Jack ... need someone whacked?”

“Naaah, just our friend here’s 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 ... you know.”

Vince laughs softly. “Okay, kid ... fair enough ... truth is I was with the Marines in Vietnam ... a munitions officer. 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 the others. “Okay, how ‘bout the rest of you? Mike, why ‘Mike the Russian?’”

“Simple. My great grandfather’s 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 at the guys 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.

“You know Mike, Gumshoe says, chuckling at his friends irritation, “he wanted to do it again at your wedding. I was going to let him, but Joey talked me out of it.”

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

“Let it go Mike,” Joey laughs.

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

“Well, some people have called him crazy for some things he’s done while fighting a fire,” Jack says, answering Tommy’s question.

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

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

“Well Bobby Prestrelski’s “pretzels,” Gumshoe says. “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, 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's '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', Rabbi Green; 'your eminence', Mike Daniels, 'preacher'; things like that."

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

"But, to satisfy your curiosity," Mike says. "Reverend Jacobson is "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 gangs in New York City, so they hung that one on him."

"How about Rabbi, Green?"

"Shuckles."

Seeing the question in Tommy's eyes, Mike nods his head. "To explain ... it's a combination; the fact that he wins at poker at the 'financial meetings' and rakes in the shekels as he calls them, and he has a wicked sense of humor. So, they were thinking, 'chuckles.'" So together, Shuckles."

"Reverend Williams?"

“Darth Vader.”

Tommy nods. “Let me guess, his voice? Like the character in the movie.”

“Exactly,” Bagels laughs, “can’t get anything past the Giant Gentile.”

Shaking his head, Tommy grins at his diminutive friend. “How about Pastor Randall?”

“‘Railbird’. John loves horse racing; he’s been known to wager a few bucks on the Derby. Still has his winning ticket on Secretariat 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.”

“Reverend Daniels?”

“Professor.”

“Yea, I can see that one. Pastor Swanson?”

“Walk off.”

A puzzled look crosses Tommy’s face. “‘Walk off?’” he asks.

“Well, a while back, 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 in a preseason game with the big club. Hit a ‘walk off’ homer in the bottom of the eleventh 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, an impish look in his eyes.

Gumshoe looks 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.

“Make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

“I have called you each by name.”

So, what’s in a name? Well, names are sacred, especially to God. Not only His, but ours. Names are to be revered, honored; so much so that two of God’s Ten Commandments 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 are made in God’s own image; one demanding we recognize in all the same dignity and honor we see in God, and ourselves.

Every name is sacred. 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.

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