

CHICKEN BACKS

“Hey, Bob, who sings that?”

“Sings what, Josh?”

“That song.”

“Ah ... let’s see ... Luther Vandross. It’s called ‘Dance with my Father Again’.”

“Kind of appropriate, what with Father’s Day this Sunday.”

“Yea, it is,” the priest says, a wistful look in his eyes. “... funny, I’m 66, and I still miss my dad.”

“Your Dad died when you were a boy, didn’t he?”

“Yea, cancer. I was twelve, but he was there when I was little...

... and I remember so much about him.”

Hi, I’m Tony Baggz ...It’s Wednesday evening here at St. Kate’s rectory. Father John was the big winner at the weekly financial Council meeting last week – a nickel/dime poker game for those of you just joining us. Scored a whole forty cents. So, it’s his turn to host the party. But as sometimes happens, he got called to the hospital. So, Father Bob is subbing for him ... preparing the evening’s spread. And this evening, we have a new player. A fellow named Henri Belliveau, from N’awlins. Henri just opened a Cajun restaurant and brought some jambalaya. The restaurant’s named, Celestine’s, for Henri’s little girl.

Rabbi Josh’s helping Bob set up and playing in the background is the ever-present music the priest loves.

Father Bob’s a rock n’ roll junkie. And somewhat of a music historian. Ask him the number one song in May, 1969 and odds are he knows the answer. Anyway, a couple Christmases ago his

parishioners chipped in and got him a great music system. When he's home, it's always on.

Hey, Father John just arrived. The night's fun's about to begin.

What say we take a seat and follow the action ...?

"So, Reverend Randall, did you have the Derby winner this year?" Bobby 'Pretzels' asks.

Sipping his coffee, John grins. "No such luck."

"... shame you can't shuffle the horses like you shuffle the cards," Rabbi Josh chuckles.

The Lutheran minister shakes his head. "That hurts," he says to the laughter of all around the table. John is known for his love of the ponies, though he isn't much of a bettor.

Shuffling the cards, Reverend Randall nods toward the speakers. "You know, that song reminds me of something funny that happened yesterday. I was at Comstock's buying groceries when I ran into a little boy from my congregation. He had two packages of chicken in his hands. Backs and necks and he was all excited ... telling me how he was getting his dad's favorite for Father's Day dinner."

"Chicken necks and backs?" Josh chuckles, "Not exactly prime rib at Antoinette's."

"Prime rib, Rabbi? ... heck that isn't even the 'early bird special' at the Colonel's," Gumshoe laughs.

"Yea, I was thinking the same thing, Jack," John says, chuckling softly. "Anyway, I asked Ellen, his mom, what little Bobby was talking about. Sending him to get ice cream, she explained. Seems some time back, times were tough and for dinner one Sunday they had chicken. It was the big meal of the week. She said her husband, Bill, took the back and the neck for his portion. Well, Bobby thought dad was crazy, so Bill proceeded to explain the neck and back were where the sweetest meat was. Ellen said Bobby gave her a 'dad's nuts' look, shrugged his shoulders, and took a leg and a thigh."

“... letting his boy have the best,” Ace says softly.

“Yea, Ace ... no doubt.”

“How about the boy’s mom, John, what’d she think?”

“She said she smiled, looked at Bill, and realized again she made the right choice.”

“Funny, my dad did somewhat the same thing,” Pretzels says. “No matter what, he always took the well-done ends of the meat loaf, or whatever, and let us kids have the best pieces. For a long time, I thought he wasn’t very sophisticated. Then when I had kids, I figured it out.”

“My dad worked two jobs,” Mike the Russian says, his tone subdued. “And every year right after Thanksgiving, seems he always had to work late. What I didn’t know was he’d taken a third job. He was determined Christmas would always be special. And it was. Santa was always good at our house.”

Sitting back in his chair, Joey smiles. “My dad loved golf. Always wanted a new set of clubs,” he says, folding his hand. “Back then a set was about two hundred bucks ... a lot of money at that time. I remember Dad working lots of overtime and putting a few bucks away in a cigar box. His ‘Wilson Staff fund’ he called it.”

Pausing, a nostalgic look crosses Joey’s face. “I remember one Father’s Day, I was about eight, and I found a quarter on the ground outside church and put it in his cigar box. Dad said it was the best present he could ever ask for.”

Heads nod around the table as Joey continues.

“Anyway, he saved for almost two years and I once heard him say that just a few more dollars and those new clubs were his. And then, I needed braces. I remember Mom and Dad talking one night when they thought I was asleep. Well, I got the braces, and later, when I asked Dad when he was getting his new clubs, he said he’d decided his old clubs were his lucky ones and he didn’t need new ones anyway. Now, when I look in the mirror, I realize how much my smile cost.”

Heads nod.

“Your turn, Mike,” Josh chuckles softly, looking at St. Matthew’s Rector.

“Well, dad was a die-hard fisherman and he always wanted a championship caliber rod and reel,” Reverend Daniels says, his voice low, not looking up from his cards. “The rig he wanted cost over three hundred dollars. And it seems every time he’d saved up just about enough, something came up. We’d ask when he was getting his new rig, and he’d tell us his old bait casting reel was tried and true and how he’d never catch more fish anyway with some ‘new-fangled contraption’.”

Dealing Gumshoe two cards, Reverend Randall laughs gently. “How ‘bout you Jack?”

A nostalgic look washes over Jack’s face. “Yea, Mike, I remember all the Sunday football games with my friends in the Bowl. Dad always had tickets, yet he’d say he’d rather watch the game on TV. I’d ask him why, because to me nothing beat going to the games. Well, he’d laugh and go on how it never rained in the family room, his best girl was in the kitchen making dinner, and he didn’t have to fight a crowd to go to the bathroom. Years later I realized Dad gave up those tickets so I could make great memories with my buddies.”

“What about you Bob?” Mike Daniels asks. “You said you remember so much about your dad.”

“Funny, but you guys pretty much captured him. He worked in the rail yard, sometimes twelve hours a day. Common labor. And, like Mike’s dad, always put in overtime around the holidays so they’d be extra special. He never really wanted much for himself, outside of a couple tickets to the Yankees in the summer.”

Pausing a moment, his voice softens, “and then he’d work more overtime so we all could go. I remember it like it was yesterday. The six of us in the bleachers, hot dogs and sodas in hand, watching Mickey, Whitey, Yogi and the guys, and how happy he looked to have his family with him. Nothing meant more to him.”

“Your daddy sounds like a great man,” Henri says.

“Yea, in a very humble way, he was. It devastated mom when he died. I think if she didn’t have us kids and her faith, she wouldn’t have survived long.”

Silence ensues ... everyone lost in thought. Then, a smile growing on his face, Rabbi Josh breaks the silence.

“Bob, didn’t someone in your church’s past say something like, ‘seek not to do great things humbly, but rather humble things greatly’? Sound like anyone you know?”

Sipping his coffee, a serene look settles on the priest’s countenance. **“Yea, my friend, I get the feeling it’s someone we all know.”**

“Amen,” Henri says softly. “Amen, mes amis.”

We speak of the Creator in terms of Father, but isn’t human fatherhood a reflection of the Divine? Made in the image and likeness of God, a good earthly father mirrors the love and care, the generosity and the sacrifice, of our Heavenly Father.

I like to think that one day in the future, around an eternal banquet table, all fathers will join with the Father of all and dine on the choicest of meats and the finest of wines. All provided by an eternal Father who gives his children the best of everything.

And on that day, we’ll all sing and dance, laugh or, maybe, even shed a tear of joy with our fathers ... again.

Thinkaboutit, I’m Tony Baggz.