

A tragic mistake ... avoided

SEVEN AND SEVENTEEN

"Your bet."

Silence.

"Hellloooo ... Darryl ... your bet."

Nothing.

"Hello, earth to 'Ace'."

Startled, Darryl Martinson looks up at Rabbi Green. "Huh? Oh, sorry 'your eminence', just thinking."

"You don't say," Josh chuckles. "Something on your mind, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Aahhh, Rabbi, it's my neighbor's kid. Sixteen years old, busted for dealing drugs. Yesterday he's playing pee wee ball, today; he's the lead story on the six o'clock news."

"And your son's what, eight? His name's Peter, right?"

"Seven, and yea, it's Peter. Suddenly I'm wondering how well I know him."

... Hi, I'm Tony Baggz. It's poker night. Tonight ... the game room at Nick Kossarides' house. Five card stud; three down, two up. Table's full. Let's see, there's the Spinelli brothers, Reverend Williams, Pastor Jacobson, Nick, Rabbi

Josh, Sammy “Bagels,” Father Bob, and a new player. Darryl Martinson. Darryl's nickname is "Ace"; a fighter pilot in the service, he now flies corporate jets. He spends a lot of time 'on the road' so to speak and really enjoys the times he can join the gang. Especially poker night.

Reverend Williams and Pastor Jacobson are helping Nick's son, Paul, in the kitchen. Paul's icing down the drinks while the two clergymen are heating the food and making the garlic bread. Nunzio taught them his recipe and now they fancy themselves as experts. Honorary "paesanos" as the Spinelli brothers call them.

Carmin was the big winner last week, so he and Vito brought some sausage lasagna and baked ziti. Nick's wife made baklava, Rabbi Josh brought his version of a Greek salad, Father Bob brought some kosher goodies for Josh and Sammy, and in addition to his wife Kristi's brownies, Darryl brought a mixed salad ... worry and concern. Seems he's searching for answers and judging from his cards, also the jack, queen, and king of hearts. My guess, he'll trade the royal flush for some good old-fashioned advice.

What do you say we listen in?

Ace checks. “Tell me Nick,” he says, “your son, Paul, he’s what, fifteen, sixteen. He’s a great kid; smart, personable, respectful. How’d you do it?”

“Thanks, Darryl ... appreciate that. But Andrea gets the lion’s share of the credit. She’s a great mom. Me, well maybe I deserve some, but honestly, I almost made the mistake too many dads make.”

“How so?”

"Not seeing the forest for the trees."

"I don't follow."

“Well, one day I was building some display cases. It was a custom job and I was hard up against a deadline. Paul was five or six at the time. He came running into my workshop with some little plastic tools he got for Christmas, ready to go to work with his dad. Evidently, he’d heard me complain to Andrea I was behind, and he wanted to help.

“Anyway, I was in a hurry, not in the best of moods, and his interruption annoyed me. So, I told him I was busy and to go play somewhere else. Well, he picked up his little tools and I heard him snifle. He looked at me and the hurt in his eyes went right through me. He just wanted to be with his dad, and I was telling him his dad didn’t want to be with him. So, I called him back, gave him a hug, told him I was sorry, and together we set about finding things he could do. Later he was brushing on some varnish and he turned and just smiled. And it was there and then I finally understood those cases weren’t my real job; that little curly haired interruption was.”

Bringing a plate of sandwiches from the kitchen, the sound of Martin Williams’ booming laugh fills the room. “I smell a child labor law violation, Nick.”

“Actually, padre,” Nick says, shaking his head, “when the varnish dried, I had to sand it all off at two the next morning and re-do it”

Pausing, Nick sips his drink and continues. “It was there and then I think I finally realized being a dad isn’t just slapping the ‘I’m the proud parent of ...’ bumper sticker on the car. It’s being involved in his everyday life. In the little things, playing catch, going fishing, washing the car. And if he misses half the dirt, who cares. The important thing isn’t a shiny car; it’s a kid who knows his dad looks out for him, loves him, and wants him in his life.”

Saying nothing, Ace nods gently. Pausing a moment, he turns to the Spinelli brothers. “Vito, Carmine, your boys work with you in the restaurant. Same reason?”

“Well partly,” Carmine says, picking up his cards. “It started because we needed the help. But now, with them going off to college, it gives us a chance to stay involved in their lives. They’ll be doing any of a dozen different things and the conversation will turn to girls or school, or something.”

Vito winks at his brother. “Yea, like Carmine says, it’s a chance to learn a thing or two, especially about girls.”

“Who, you or the boys?” Nick chuckles, a devilish look in his eyes.

“Well, Nunzio actually,” Carmine deadpans. “Being married to “Tiff”, he needs all the help he can get.”

The mention of Nunzio and Tiffany brings chuckles around the table. Everyone has their favorite “Tiff and Z” story. A fun, and at times, zany couple, they’re a neighborhood legend. A "goombah" and the daughter of a “Wasp” banker. How that marriage came about is a story in itself. Maybe later. But they’re a great couple. And a better mother than Tiffany you won't find anywhere.

Looking over Carmine’s head, Nick spots a painting. “See that picture over the stereo, Darryl?” he asks. “It’s Joseph teaching young Jesus the skills of a carpenter. Joseph gave his boy his time and attention, and the knowledge and skill of a craft. Can't you picture the two of them, working together in the Galilean sunshine, with Joseph teaching and talking with his boy?”

“Yea ... I can,” Darryl says somewhat absent mindedly, the look on his face a faraway one.

Smiling gently, Nick continues. "Scripture shows Jesus as a man of vision, direction, courage, and compassion; all qualities of a good strong man, and the product of Joseph’s time and effort. Something we often miss. Ever wonder what that first conversation was between Joseph and his Heavenly

Father when they finally met face to face?”

“Interesting thought,” Darryl says. “I never really thought about Joseph in that way.”

“You and everyone else,” says Reverend Jacobson. “If that old cliché, ‘the child is the father of the man,’ is true, then Joseph was an exceptional influence on the boy. Like Nick says, something we often miss.”

Rabbi Josh nods in the direction of Ace’s hand. “Ace, you have the ten and the ace of hearts showing. If you’re an absentee dad now, when he’s little, well, you have a better chance of holding the inside three to that royal flush, than expecting a teenage son to automatically respect you if you’ve never really been involved in his life. Absentee dads who show up one day demanding automatic respect and obedience are unrealistic, at best.”

Nick throws in a nickel. “Call.”

It’s showtime. Carmine has an ace high, Vito, two pair, sevens and nines, Nick, a pair of kings, and Josh turns his cards to show three fives.

Spreading his hand, Darryl shakes his head. “Ace, ten, queen of hearts, four of diamonds, jack of spades. Kangaroo straight.”

“Sorry, Ace ... the poker angel passed over that hand,” Josh says, chuckling softly. “But you still have lots of time to be a winner with Peter, right?”

Josh’s “passover” reference draws a laugh around the table.

Ace smiles. “Right, Rabbi.” Pausing a moment, he looks up. “Thanks fellas. Funny ...

... never thought I’d enjoy losing a hand so much.”

It's easier to raise strong children, than to repair broken men. – Frederick Douglas.

The late Harry Chapin's song, "Cat's in the Cradle," points to the sad truth of absentee dads. If you don't have you son, or your daughter for that matter, in the palm of your hand at seven, you won't have them at seventeen, twenty-seven, or probably, ever. You'll end up little more than a distant relative.

A child is a gift from a Heavenly Father to an earthly one; a gift to be treasured, one for which you are a chosen steward. Children are not decorations and they certainly are not interruptions. They are a father's life; an awesome responsibility. And, one day, that heavenly Father will ask for an account of your stewardship. Here's hoping on that day, they'll be your pride and joy. And a reason to hear ...

"Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and take the place My Father has prepared for you."

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.