

The man in the black suit with the fancy buttons, and the white on white shirt and tie; take my advise; you don't want to meet him.

“Fat Tony Buttons”

"Nooooooooo ... not another goal ..."

“ ... shorthanded no less,” ‘Gumshoe’ moans. "Damn Pretzels, ...they’re playing like they don’t care. That’s the second puck Grattan’s given away ... the guy’s just mailing it in."

"... down three to one with two minutes left," Bobby says, shaking his head ... "Chalk up another loss."

"... four in a row. One more and they’re mathematically eliminated," Jack says

".... out of the playoffs for another year ...

"What do you think, Father ... Satan working overtime here?"

Chuckling, Father Bob looks across the table.

"You just might be on to something there, Jack"

Hi, Tony here. It’s Saturday afternoon here at Mama Christallo’s. Best pizzeria and Italian deli in the city. Opinion is evenly divided among the gang as to whether the pizza at Mama’s or Spinelli’s is the best; though, you can’t go wrong in either place. Both the Christallos and the Spinelli brothers are

friendly competitors, to the point they often refer customers to each other's establishment.

“Mama” is actually Inga Bjornson, originally from a small town outside Stockholm. A naturalized American citizen, she met Rocco Christallo about ten years ago on a trip to New York City; Brooklyn to be exact. Rocco was working at Papa Donati's; his uncle's pizza parlor, when Inga stopped in to try the local cuisine. It was love at first sight. Married a year later, Rocco taught her how to cook Italian to the point she's now a naturalized paisan, and together, they opened this place.

Serving the gang is Wilhelmina van Doren, affectionately known as ‘Willie;’ and often called the Countess of Calzone. Somewhere way back in Willie's family is European royalty and she rules over Mama's like a queen over her loyal subjects, including Rocco's two boys, Tony and Michael. Her heritage is German Swiss, but she effects a terrific Brooklyn accent. I guess, working with Rocco for so long does that to a girl. Willie's not only the senior waitress, but also the general manager; running the business side while Rocco and Inga reign over the kitchen.

This afternoon, the Boys in black are playing Satan's buddies from The Garden State. Father Bob, Father John, and some of the gang have gathered to watch the hockey game and feast on a couple extra-large pepperoni, bacon, ham, and sausage pizzas; known far and wide as the “carnivore's special.”

The game's all but over, whatdya say we stick around to see what comes next ... o.k.?

"Hey Willie ... you believe in the devil?"

"Sure, Bullets; only someone truly evil would put pineapple on a pizza," she laughs.

Winking, Bullets gives Willie a thumbs up.

"You don't serve pineapple on pizza here; even a special order?" Bobby Pretzels asks.

"Hey, you've been here dozens of times, Pretzels. When did you ever see pineapple as a topping?"

"So, you discriminate against islanders who like their pizza with a hometown touch?"

"Discriminate? No, ... keeping customers out of the hospital, yea. If Rocco ever got wind of someone ordering pineapple on a pizza, Fat Tony "Buttons" would deliver it with a side order of baseball bat."

"Fat Tony "Buttons?"

"You know him, Bobby," Gumshoe says; "big guy, always in a dark suit or sport jacket with mother of pearl buttons."

"Yea, now I remember." A look of recognition crosses, Pretzels face. "Oh, and uh, yea ... no pineapple," he says.

Chuckling to himself, Bobby winks at Willie. "But, no, seriously, do you believe in Satan; you know, the real one?"

"Why wouldn't I; Christ spoke of Him ... no better source," she says, her tone turning serious.

"Father Bob, how do you answer someone when they say there's no such thing as the Devil," she asks.

The conversation lapses as the final buzzer sounds, ending the game.

"Well, at least the pizza was worth it," Pretzels says.

"And the waitress," Bullets says winking at Willie.

"Flirt!" Willie laughs, winking back.

"Well, Willie, I agree with your first answer," the pastor says. "Pineapple on pizza is straight from hell."

The priest's response brings a round of laughter.

"You have to remember, Wille, the boss here grew up in the Bronx where pizza is one of the four basic food groups. That's what we call an infallible source," Gumshoe chuckles.

More laughter ensues.

"There are however, several thoughts I'll offer if the question arises," the priest says as the laughter fades.

"And they are?" Willie asks.

"Well, first, like you said, our Lord spoke of him; that's my infallible source."

Saying nothing, Willie nods in agreement.

"Secondly, God observes his own laws."

"Interesting ... how do you mean?"

"Well, we live in what I'd call a bi-polar world. Everything has its opposite."

Curious looks abound. "Explain that one," Father, Bullets asks.

"Well, Vince, natural law tells us every action has an equal and opposite reaction. So, if there's a being of life and creation, God, a Holy spirit, there has to be a being of death and destruction, Satan, an Evil Spirit."

"So, God created evil," Gumshoe asks?

"No, Jack, He created free will. Satan chose evil."

"What else, Father," Willie asks.

"Well, all, evil in some form, is a lie, and Satan's the father of lies. Again, something Our Lord called him. And, the first lie men believe is he's all-powerful as he likes being pictured. No, Satan is a pathetic street hustler promising what he knows he can't deliver. His lies promise happiness, fulfillment, and success. But in the end deliver emptiness, corruption, deceit, and ultimately death."

"What else?" Pretzels asks.

"Something insidious, Bobby; something simple, something on a much grander scale than the mere individual temptation; something society in general doesn't recognize ... something Satan employs to perfection."

"Curious, what's that," Jack asks.

"Mediocrity."

Curious, puzzled looks light the faces around the table.

"Go on, Father," Willie says.

"Well, to me, this is his most dangerous and destructive tactic. Satan's smart; he knows directly attacking the good God created will fail; after all, man's gullible, but not stupid."

"So, to cripple and ultimately destroy what's good, he simply blesses its opposite, mediocrity ... or worse. He takes advantage of man's desire to be accepted; to be a welcome part of society."

"Again, that bi-polar idea?" Bobby asks.

"Yea, Bobby. And if you want proof just look at values over the last couple of decades."

The conversation lapses momentarily as the pastor orders another round of drinks.

"Here's maybe the simplest example of what I'm saying," he says, picking up the conversation.

"There was a time when dress was an indication of a person's attitude toward himself and others; a sign of respect. Modest, clean clothes, neatly pressed, indicated pride in one's appearance. Today, we've gone way past casual Friday to sloppy being in vogue; whatever makes one comfortable. The fashionable woman today sports jeans that look they've been through a wood chipper. Clothes, especially in church, have

gone from dresses and suits to yoga pants and three-day old shirts cycled through the dryer so they don't smell too bad."

"Okay," Willie says, overhearing the conversation as she brings the drinks. "I take it you're saying, for instance, if you want to destroy marriage and the family, you praise its opposite."

"Exactly. Marriage was sacred; sex, reserved for those united in that sacred bond we call matrimony; a sacrament, that place where our Lord lives. Today, society increasingly considers the concept of sacrament irrelevant and matrimony, passe`, tedious and boring. It glorifies unions without commitment and bestows its blessing on casual liaisons as mature, exciting, and fulfilling."

"The hookup culture ..." Willie says, her words trailing off.

"Exactly, Willie. And take that a step further. Not only is divorce no longer considered a failure, voices now praise it as normal, healthy, and even a natural eventuality.

"And Satan doesn't stop there. He goes on to attack the fundamental building block of society; the family. Listen to the growing chorus claiming children are no longer a blessing, but a hindrance; an expensive burden, depriving the self-indulgent of their pleasures and toys."

"Everything's casual these days: clothes, the law; the work ethic, discipline, relationships, sex, even life itself."

Shaking his head, resignation and sadness cloud the pastor's face.

"You don't think Satan's hard at work ...

... I beg to differ."

It's been said, Satan's greatest accomplishment has been to convince mankind he doesn't exist.

In his classic work, The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis echoes Father Bob's bi-polar concept. Unlike God, who encourages man to look outward with an inherent sense of respect for himself and the intrinsic worth of others, Satan urges man to turn inward, seeking self-gratification, personal fulfillment, and even decadence.

You think not; for starters, just watch people drive on a highway.

And the sadder truth is, Satan's increasingly successful on an even grander scale; sabotaging whole societies by glorifying greed, self-indulgence, laziness, and mediocrity. All in the name of ...

... freedom.

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.

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