

My Friend Joey

By Arthur Shapiro



“My face hurt from grinning, and all the muscles in my stomach were sore. I hadn’t laughed that much in a long time. The only one who could make me laugh like that was Joey Levine, my best friend since the sixth grade.

Joey is quite a character. In Junior High, he pulled all kinds of pranks on the teachers and the other kids, especially the stuck-up ones.

Oh, he was a clown, all right, but what he wanted to do most in his life was become a gangster. Not a street gang member but an Al Capone, Dutch Schultz kind of gangster. When someone said Joseph (his real name), Jews don’t become gangsters, he would get angry and remind them of Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegel, Louis Buchhalter, who ran Murder Incorporated, and others.

He would say, I’m going to start the Kosher Nostra. Cracked everybody up.

So, by the time he was seventeen, he hooked up with some mob guys doing odd jobs and making them laugh until their stomachs were sore, just like when we were kids.

Around that time, they began calling him “Bag o’ Bagels.” He ran numbers out of a bagel store and kept the chits and money in a bag of bagels. Guys liked the idea, except for the time the bag was full of garlic bagels, and the money stank for a week. The boss said it was like marked bills. Ever since then, his nickname became “Bag o’ Bagels.”

As time passed, he became increasingly important in the “business” and got his own territory and crew. In addition to being tough and funny, his team was the most diverse of all the gangs. Jews, Latinos, Blacks, Mexicans, gays, and women were all part of his crew. All ethnic groups were represented. That’s when the mob decided to call him and his crew “Assorted Bagels.”

The law finally caught up with him, and he's serving 3 to 5 years at the Federal Correctional Institute in Otisville, NY— tax evasion, like Capone. But here's the thing — from the guards to the warden, they love him because he cracks them up.

He's still a character that Joey Levine.

I really felt bad when I arrested him.