

Pete Gets Religion . . .

After Sal moved to Seattle with Fex and Coo, he thought he was done with Pete's overlordship. One overlord—Fex—was quite enough, he thought. Well, two overlords, actually. Fex and Jolene, but Jolene was a different story—at least Sal was getting paid for kowtowing to Jolene. But apparently total freedom from Pete was too much to ask. Pete's advertising business required that he make periodic trips to the West Coast to drum up business, hold hands, put out fires—the daily much-ado of corporate life. Thus, once in a while Pete would fly into Seattle and call Sal for a get-together. “Hey, we're brothers, Sal,” Pete would remind Sal at the slightest hint of reluctance.

And so Sal would undergo the periodic ritual humiliation of driving to Sea-Tac to have a drink with Pete in the “Admiral's Lounge” or the “VIP Lounge,” or whatever the airport's current version of you-must-be-a-big-shot-if-you're-sitting-here lounge happened to be. Or they would meet at some fancy downtown Seattle hotel. Always the white tablecloths and the heavy silverware and the white, filigreed porcelain coffee cups with handles you couldn't get your finger through. Or the dark-lit bar with soft jazz music and old-fashioned glasses you could barely lift with one hand.

Pete would usually spend the entire get-together grilling Sal on how much he made, what his prospects for advancement at the bank were, whether he'd been to the Bahamas or Hawaii yet—every question or comment apparently designed to make Sal feel like a chump. Sal's only defense was to run up the tab—Pete always paid—and get royally drunk.

One occasion, however, was different.

“Hey, Sal, it's your brother. I love you, Sal.”

“Say what?” Sal squirmed inwardly. Was this Pete? He wondered. Pete Pugliese? My brother?

“I said I love you, Sal. Peace to you, my brother. Peace and joy.”

Now what kind of a trap is Pete setting for me, Sal thought, and he said as much.

“You bullshittin' me, Pete?”

“No bullshit, Sal. I'm full of love. Cosmic love, in fact. Meet me at the airport tonight, at the Marriott. Dinner. It'll be my treat. I'll prove it to you.”

“Oh yeah?” Sal was skeptical. Still, he hadn't had an expensive dinner for some time.

Maybe he'd order a big steak with lobster tail, garlic potatoes and a glass of champagne. See how much Mr. Divine was willing to shell out for a big meal.

So they set a time, and that evening, after work, Sal motored down the freeway to Sea-Tac and the Marriott.

Sal intentionally arrived early so he could slip into the bar adjoining the dining room for a quick martini before Pete showed up. Knock off the rough edges. Lubricate the gears. Oil the crankcase. Sal didn't know why the only metaphors he could think of were mechanical, but the martini arrived before he could answer the question. By the second martini he didn't care. He was just about to pop the olive into his mouth when a vision—like a hologram of liquid butterscotch projected into the space just inside the door—swept into the bar. It was Pete. He was beaming beatifically, and practically flew over to Sal and enveloped him in a billowy embrace, followed by what seemed like a cloud of incense.

The butterscotch effect was from the robes Pete was wearing—"saffron," he called the color, though it looked like butterscotch to Sal. Pete's head was shaved and he wore sandals. Sal wondered if he was wearing any underwear beneath the flowing robes. It didn't look like it.

"Sal, my brother," gushed Pete, holding Sal at arm's length then slamming him with another brotherly bear hug. "It's so beautiful to see you, my brother!"

Sal looked at Pete like he was crazy.

"What have you been smokin', Pete?" Sal asked skeptically.

"No joke, Sal. It's for real. I've been saved."

"You mean you're a Jesus freak?"

"Nope. I'm a Krishna freak."

"Say who?"

"Krishna. He's the Avatar of Vishnu. You would call him God, I suppose, though that would be a lesser form. No offense, of course."

"No offense and no, I wouldn't," said Sal emphatically, as he motioned the bartender to bring a third martini.

"What'll you have, Pete? Martini? Bourbon? Scotch?" Sal welcomed the break in Jesus talk.

"Just pure water for me, please. No ice."

Sal grimaced, but nodded to the bartender, who grunted and walked off to get the glasses.

“I have a maha-mantra now, Sal. It’s taken away all my burdens.”

“Ma said that’s what the catechism was supposed to do. She said Jesus would take away your burdens.”

“Well, for you maybe, or for Mom, but I’ve been liberated from all that mumbo-jumbo. Now I breathe the true breath of the spirit. It’s really a trip. You should try it.”

The bartender brought Pete’s glass of pure water and Sal’s martini.

“Well, here’s mud in your maharaji, or whatever you call it.”

Pete took a quick sip of water, Sal a quick slug of gin and vermouth.

“Maha-mantra, Sal. Hey, do you want to learn it?” Pete reached into a small embroidered pouch that was hanging around his neck and brought out a set of brass finger cymbals and slipped them on.

“No, thanks, Pete.”

“No, thanks, what?”

“No, I don’t want to learn the song.” Sal was starting to get his back up.

“It’s simple, Sal. Just sixteen words. Then you repeat them, over and over.” Before Sal could form a retort Pete started playing the finger symbols and launched into the Hare Krishna chant, weaving his head back and forth. Already he was approaching some kind of moist-eyed ecstasy, but before he reached the ninth word of the chant Sal held up his hand and stopped him in his tracks.

Pete, crestfallen, dampened the ringing finger cymbals against his robe.

“Look, Pete, I’m glad you got religion, but I don’t want any. Got it?”

“Sure, brother, I hear you. Hare Krishna. I just thought you could use a little peace, a little freedom from suffering.”

“Yeah, I can use some of that, all right,” and he drained the rest of the martini. “Hey, let’s get some food in our bellies.” Sal was tipsy now and wanted to move things along.

“Sure, let’s go.” Pete had never been so compliant.

The reunited brothers moved into the dining room and sat at a corner booth. Sal glanced around. Mostly business men in suits, business women in suits, cowboys with big hats and tooled boots.

Sal picked up the menu. It felt like it had been fabricated from two sheets of $\frac{3}{4}$ ” plywood and covered with padded Naugahyde. He ordered the steak-and-lobster plate with extra garlic

potatoes and a side of dumplings. Hold the Bac-O-Bits.

“And a glass of champagne,” Sal added.

Pete ordered a side of tofu—steamed, not fried—and a small bowl of brown rice. The waiter said they didn’t have a side of tofu, but Pete asked if maybe they could make a special order of it. “I bet the cook has some tofu for the Asian plate.”

“I’ll ask,” said the waiter. “Something to drink?” He seemed annoyed with Pete’s paltry order.

“Just more pure water, please. Thank you, brother. Peace. Hare Krishna.”

Sal was starting to get annoyed as well. Pete’s beatific good humor seemed too good to be true.

“Don’t you wanna squash cockroaches or somethin’ now and then?” he said a bit too aggressively.

“Not if I can help it, brother. Not if I can help it.” Pete smiled.

Finally, the food arrived and Sal dug into his steak while Pete nibbled at the quivering pieces of off-white tofu.

When Sal asked Pete how he had suddenly discovered religion, Pete told him the story of walking through Sea-Tac one day on a business trip. A group of Hare Krishna devotees were singing, dancing and making music inside the airport. Two young women in saffron robes were handing out flowers to passengers. “Peace,” they offered with the flowers.

Pete was so enthralled, that he missed his appointment, sitting cross-legged on the terrazzo floor for two hours, learning the maha-mantra chant, hearing the story of Swami Prabhupad, the manifestations of Vishnu, and other esoteric pieces of Hindu lore. The notion of casting off the illusion of suffering, and entering the world of bliss through the vehicle of sixteen simple words, sparked such an unaddressed desire on Pete’s part—that’s what he told Sal anyway—that he decided right then and there to quit the advertising business and become a full-time devotee of Krishna-consciousness.

“What about your rosary?”

“Gave it away.”

“What about the St. Christopher medal?”

“Gave it away.”

“What about all them little books about the saints Ma used to make us read?”

“Gave them all away, Sal. Don’t need them. Don’t you see? Everything Jesus was trying to say is in this mantra, all the saints, all the philosophers—it’s all the same. And it’s so simple.” Sal was addressing himself to the dumplings in a most direful manner—to follow Melville. Then, having trimmed the fat off the steak, he went after the meat like a wolf bringing down a caribou. Pete slipped a spoonful of brown rice into his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully.

“Mindfulness, Sal. You should be mindful of every bit of food you eat.”

“Yeah?” said Sal, though his mouth was so full he couldn’t enunciate very clearly. A trickle of red juice ran down his chin.

Pete reached over with his napkin and dabbed at the red drop.

Sal reached for the champagne glass and washed down the mouthful of rare beef.

“Bless you, Sal. Hare Krishna.”

“Hare Krishna to you too, Pete.”

Pete did not take the bait.

“So.” Sal belched, then continued. “What’re you gonna do now?”

“Well, Sal, that’s one reason I wanted to talk to you. I’m going to establish a meditation center, an ashram, here in Seattle.”

Sal hiccupped into his napkin. “Do what?”

“Set up an ashram. Here in Seattle,” Pete repeated.

“An ashram?” Now Sal was repeating. “What the hell’s that?”

“It’s a holy place, Sal. A place where people go and meditate, chant, dance. A place where people can find joy in this suffering, deceitful world.”

“You can say that again,” opined Sal, now getting a little groggy.

“Of course, I’ll need some financing.”

Sal flinched. This was going too far. It was bad enough to hear that Pete was thinking of moving to Seattle, but financing? From Ling Bank? From Jolene?

“Wait a minute, Pete. I ain’t no bank. I work at a bank. There’s a difference. Get it?”

“Oh, I understand that, Sal. I just wanted to put the bee in your bonnet. Maybe you could look at interest rates for me, see what kind of deal you could make.”

“Well, maybe I’ll check the rates, but I ain’t promisin’ nothin’.” Sal was beginning to lapse into his childhood speech patterns, not that he ever lost them altogether.

“Wonderful, my brother. I’ll be here for a few days, looking at real estate. I’ve already

got a few good leads. I can't wait to spread the joy."

Sal's head was beginning to throb. "Hey, Pete, I gotta go. I gotta get outta here."

"Me too, Sal. I have to meditate."

Pete gestured to the waiter, who brought the check and set it on the table. Pete pushed it in front of Sal.

"I'm sure you won't mind, Sal. I don't carry money with me any more. See?" And he reached into the pouch where the finger cymbals had been stored, then pulled it inside out.

"Empty. No filthy cash, just pure Krishna-consciousness."

Pete looked startled.

"Thanks, my brother," said Pete. And he leaned over to kiss Sal on the middle of his forehead.

"That's your third eye," he said to Sal, who was almost cross-eyed after the unexpected kiss.

With that Pete whirled out of the dining room and disappeared into the elevator.

Sal picked up the check, stunned. He looked at it, thought for a moment, then reluctantly reached for his wallet and paid the bill.

All the way home, a maha-mantra went through Sal's head, over and over without stopping. It consisted of sixteen words:

"My brother, Pete, moving to Seattle. Moving to Seattle, my brother, Pete. Seattle, Seattle. Pete, Pete. "