

*Sal's story (as based on Heron Man's research notes) ...*

One evening, Sal stopped at a liquor store after work to pick up a pint of bourbon and some Cheetos. A sign on the counter said, "We card everybody," and they did, so Sal had to show his driver's license. The clerk looked at the card, looked at Sal, and said aloud, "Salvatore Dominic Pugliese." He mispronounced the last name.

Sal shot the young man a stern glance. "Hey! Knock it off. Keep your nose outta my business. Besides, it's Sal, not Salvatore." Then he grabbed the card out of the clerk's hands.

"All right, mister, all right. Don't get sore."

Sal paid the bill and left in a huff, stuffing the wallet in his pocket and muttering to himself all the way to the car. The clerk didn't realize there was a story behind the name. Salvatore. Savior. Sal.

Nobody called him Salvatore except his mother, María Angelina Pugliese Tartaglia—known to all as "Angie," may she rest in peace—and his older brother, Pete, who throughout childhood enjoyed teasing Sal about his name, despite their mother's admonitions to "be good boys."

"Sal-va-tooooo-rey," Pete would say tauntingly. Occasionally Pete would even call him "Salamander." Sal would turn red and try to slug Pete, but since he was two years younger, he just didn't have the reach. Besides, whenever he did connect, Pete would immediately slug him back, only harder.

Pete's name was actually Pietro, but those two syllables didn't give Sal much to work with, in terms of retaliatory teasing. He tried saying "Pieeeeeee-tro" a few times, but Pete just laughed and shrugged it off. Four syllables definitely gave the advantage to a merciless aggressor. So Sal just gave up the game and kept a low profile whenever Pete was around—too often in those early days, but not so much now, fortunately.

Pete had gone into advertising after one year of community college. He liked the fancy clothes, the coiffed hair, the after-shave lotions—Brut, English Leather—that were so popular among the Madison Avenue set. Smooth-talking and handsome, Pete was the Golden Boy of the Pugliese clan. His mother was very proud of him.

At family gatherings, Pete was either in Sal's face, badgering, or was ignoring him altogether, which Sal preferred. While Pete was beating the pants off everybody at croquet,

Sal would drift off by himself and walk around the block, kicking tin cans, or throwing rocks into a little drainage creek that ran behind the house.

What he enjoyed most, though, was going into the little parlor when no one was around and playing the spinet piano. He had never taken lessons, but he had always been fascinated with the piano. If Pete was around, he wouldn't play, because of the inevitable cloudburst of mockery. Pete's absence was like sunshine for Sal.

Sal read some music but played mainly by ear. Father Pancetta, who conducted the church choir in which Sal sang, and who heard him play the piano once while visiting the mother, said that the boy had talent, "mebbe even-eh perfect-eh peetch."

The piano, then, was shaping up to be Salvatore's salvation. Piano, and math. His math teacher, Miss Plotkin, said he had a "math mind." Sal was always faster than the other kids in solving the arithmetic problems she wrote on the blackboard or selected from the textbook, problems he invariably worked out in his head.

Other than math—his public skill—and the piano—his private skill—Sal was pretty much a loner and misfit, showing no aptitude in other subjects.

His early aspirations, then, to become either a musician or a math teacher, were quietly nursed as heavily guarded secrets. Meanwhile, Pete garnered all the laurels.

Sal's secret aspirations were shattered the day before his sixteenth birthday. That was the day his father, Nick, went down to the corner store in the early evening to buy a carton of Lucky Strikes and a six-pack of Schlitz . . . and never came back.

Sal didn't know anything was wrong until the next afternoon, after school, because his mother was trying to protect him and Pete from she-didn't-know-what. By that evening, however, she was nearly hysterical. The police came tromping through the house, asking questions, snooping. Sal and Pete had to go outdoors while the cops interviewed their mother. Relatives and neighbors came over, offering unsolicited advice, advancing theories about what had happened. A doctor friend brought sedatives. The next day people were bringing food. After a week the house was like a funeral parlor. After a month it was like a tomb. The mystery of Nick's disappearance was never solved.

Having worked as a part-time truck driver, Nick had no life insurance, no pension, no savings. Sal had not known how close to poverty they were. And the mother herself was not well prepared to support the family, although she began to take on work doing ironing and

babysitting, plus the occasional clothing alteration.

For Pete and Sal it was a wake-up call.

Pete dumped his old paper route onto Sal, and while he was climbing the ladder in the ad-business, he also took a part-time job as a caddy at the local golf course where politicians and big shots often played. It wasn't long before he was playing with a low handicap and offering advice to the big wigs on the characteristics of different grasses, the slopes and angles of various greens, wind speed and direction, club selection and, incidentally, where the players could hook up with good-looking, good-time "broads."

Golf and advertising made a natural fit. Soon Pete was virtually the sole supporter of the family.

Meanwhile Sal was small for his age, so he still wore Pete's leftover jeans, and kept getting the rolled-up cuffs caught in the bicycle chain-sprocket while delivering papers. On one occasion he totaled the bike and nearly himself, flying over the handlebars while his pants' cuff dragged the bike along by the sprocket. That was the day he quit the delivery job and boldly approached Tony "The Frog" Marconi about the possibility of a job in the numbers business. Tony was making lots of money—everybody called it "dough"—running numbers, enough that he could afford to hire Sal as his "boy" to do the running for him. Compared to his wages delivering newspapers, the numbers racket was the big time for Sal. He was quick and agile, and his facility with numbers was impressive. Even Tony was impressed.

Thus, less than a year after his father's disappearance, Sal's fate was as good as sealed. But it was cast along different lines from those he once imagined. No more piano. No more math teaching. No more "good boy." It would be a career, in a sense, of tightrope walking. On one side was the abyss of penny-pinching under the law. On the other side was the abyss of full-blown, well-paying crime. The thin rope in between was his conscience, such as it was. The balancing bar was his agility with numbers. Of course, his tendency to stay in the background, and his ability to take a hit when necessary, helped the balancing act.

It was only natural, then, that he and Fex, who attended the same high school, would gravitate toward each other. They skimmed and scammed their way lightheartedly through various hair-brained schemes—marbles, jacks and baseball cards at first, graduating to poker and sports betting later on.

One day Fex announced that he was “gonna blow this joint”—meaning he had to leave New Jersey in a hurry as a result of a deal gone very, very sour. Upon hearing that news, Sal had a momentary epiphany. He realized that he could see just as many prospects for himself on the West Coast as he could on the East. Coo was already Fex’s factotum by then, doing every conceivable odd job for Fex, and Coo’s compliant nature made that position seem secure. That was fine with Sal, who preferred to be the odd-man-out anyway, the “third wheel,” as he called it. Let Fex be the boss man, if he wanted; and let Coo be the leg-man. But Sal would be the numbers-man.

So the three odd fellows moved to Seattle within a month of each other. Fex, of course, was the center of gravity, the Jupiter of the group, while Sal and Coo were the two most visible of Jupiter’s moons.

After a few years of knocking around from job to job, Sal landed his teller’s position at Ling Bank.

“Keep it,” said Fex with finality, when Sal told him about the job. “We need somebody on the inside. Somebody who knows the ropes.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t sign up for a life sentence,” retorted Sal.

“Keep the job, Sal, until I tell you to quit. We’ll figure out a way to make a bundle. Meanwhile, just keep your nose clean.”

And so, lacking any better prospects, Sal bent to the burden of seeing money pass through his hands every day without being able to stuff his pockets full—all under the thumb and watchful eye of Miss Jolene Baker-Tomlins.

In order to keep from getting bored, Sal amused himself inventing larcenous schemes, the way some people amuse themselves with crossword puzzles, solitaire or Sudoku. Occasionally he would present the outline of a scheme to Fex, who immediately gave it a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down, like a Roman emperor judging gladiators at the Coliseum.