

THE SALAD OIL KING

An American Tale of Greed Gone Mad

—

M.G. CRISCI

INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS

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Illustrations by M.G. Crisci
Edited by Mathew J. Crisci, Robin Friedheim
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*This book is dedicated to my son Matt,
my editor, my inspiration, my collaborator, my friend*

Author's Note

The Salad Oil King is a work of fiction inspired by true events. The protagonist did exist during the approximate time frame of this story. Many of the historical circumstances are real, as are some elements of the protagonist's business dealings. However, all the other characters, names, and events are fictional.

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During a Chinese famine of the 1870's, a Hong Kong merchant sold



a sardine can filled with mud to an other merchant,



who sold it at a profit to a third merchant,



who sold it at a profit to a fourth.



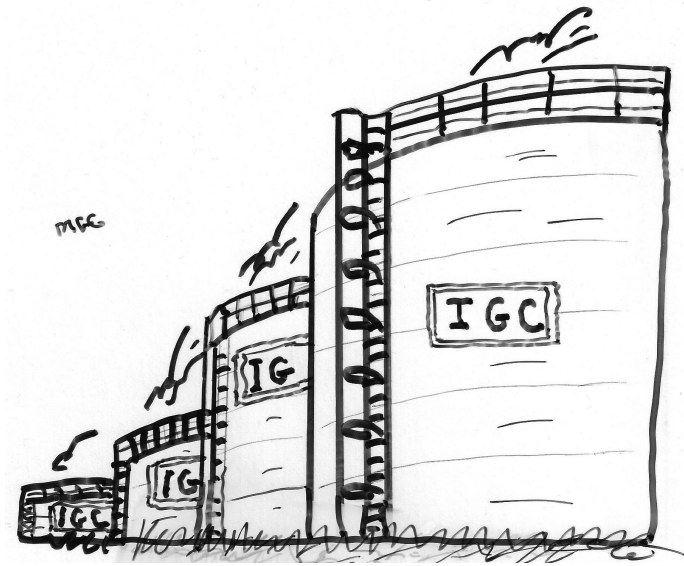
When merchant No. 5 opened the can he discovered the fraud and complained. No. 4 replied, "Why did you open the can?"

-Anonymous

Part One

Becoming Fonso

Chapter 1



July, 1963
Bayonne, NJ

It was almost dusk at the tank farm. An endless maze of huge red and green storage tanks connected to hundreds of pipes, huffed and puffed against a vibrant blue canvas.

The day shift was gone. All that remained was a guard sipping a bottle of 7-UP in the wooden shack at the entrance. And a skeleton maintenance crew on a dinner break in a nearby repair shed who were devouring Benuti's daily deli special — a crusty

Italian hero stuffed with Genoa salami, Parma prosciutto, provolone and roasted red peppers.

Two men, one built like a pick-up truck, the other like a toothpick, pulled up to the guard shack. They were driving an unmarked 1961 Ford Grand Torino station wagon. “We’re from Global Express (GLOBEX). Mr. Gravenese suggested this was a good time to do the usual inventory verification.” The guard looked in the car, waved them through.

Pick-Up truck’s driver was veteran FBI agent Fred Norman, 56, who ran the Bureau’s North Jersey field office. Toothpick was his protégé, Jim Edwards, 29, a charter member of the new breed of college-educated, science-based agents.

The tank farm was situated on a piece of unattractive industrial wasteland at the end of the Bayonne Peninsula.

To the West was the bustling transportation complex of Port Elizabeth. From there, trains were dispatched across America, and huge container ships visited international ports of call from Europe to China.

To the East was a picture perfect view of the lower Manhattan skyline, the Statue of Liberty, and Fonso Gravenese’s home away from home — Wall Street. In the background was the incessant hum of traffic from America’s busiest, and perhaps ugliest thoroughfare, the New Jersey Turnpike.

Norman pulled to the far corner of the parking lot, out of the guard’s view. He popped the trunk

and removed a lightweight plastic extension pole. He fiddled with it for a few minutes to make sure the sections opened and closed properly.

“Let me guess,” teased Edwards, “your snitch sells the Bureau information and poles?”

“Junior, let’s get to it,” smirked Norman. “IT” was a cluster of tanks on the edge, not visible to the guard.

The men trudged through a muddy patch of earth littered with Tootsie Roll wrappers, Coke bottles, Wise Potato Chip bags, and half-eaten Devil Dogs “Over here,” shouted Norman, who stood at the base of a 120-rung steel ladder bolted to the side of a tank. “You first,” he said, tapping the lower rungs.

Edwards looked straight up. “You must be kidding. I’m acrophobic.”

“Wasn’t in your profile,” commented Norman. “Start climbing.”

Edwards took a deep breath before he began his journey. A third of the way up, he stopped to catch his breath. Norman — in great shape for a man his age — grew impatient. “You should be ashamed. A guy almost twice your age, and carrying a pole no less, is whipping your ass to the top of Mount Grain.”

Minutes later, the two men climbed over the three-foot high wrought iron railing bolted to the top of the tank. “Let’s take five,” said Edwards, perspiring like a pig.

“No rush,” said Norman. “Cause we’re not leaving till we find that damn trap door. According to my source, GLOBEX always took Gravenese’s representations at face value.” At the time, GLOBEX was one of the world’s most trusted banking institutions.

“Boss, surely you jest,” said Edwards. “One-point-eight-billion-dollars (*\$13.9 billion today’s dollars*) in misrepresentations? Impossible.”

Norman shrugged. “Maybe the Global auditors didn’t want to dirty their fancy English suits.”

The men circled the perimeter of the tank in opposite directions. “Here,” said an excited Edwards, sounding like Columbus discovering America. “But it’s bolted shut, and, I don’t have anything to open it.”

“Scientists,” smiled Norman, as he pulled a flat adjustable wrench out of his jacket. “Maybe there’s still room for a few dinosaurs.”

A few formidable grunts and groans later, the trap door sprung open like a Jack-in-the-Box. Norman poked his head inside. The tank appeared to be filled to the legal limit with light, golden vegetable oil. In the middle of the tank was a guide hole for testing liquid inventories.

The usual process was to place a measuring rod, similar to an extra-long automotive dipstick, down the guide hole until it reached the bottom. When the stick was removed, it indicated how many feet of oil were actually in the tank. Every Global warehousing

inspection had certified inventories were exactly as represented by International Grain management.

Norman followed the prescribed process and obtained the same results. “I don’t get it Snitch seemed absolutely, positively certain.”

“People make mistakes,” consoled Edwards.

“Not when they’re part of the inner circle.”

A frustrated Norman paced the tank perimeter a few times. He came to an abrupt halt. “Einstein was right. Doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results is insane.” He pulled the stick out. “Let’s try the test a little differently.”

Edwards watched.

“This time I’m going to drop the goddamn pole outside the test hole and stir it around.” Norman directed. “Start snaking, I’ll guide it.” The two men lifted the pole, dropped it into the outer ring, and let gravity take over. Seconds later the pole came to an abrupt halt. Norman tried to wiggle it free. “I think we just hit a Long Beach Island sand bar.”

“Jim, give the pole a few slow twists. I think we finally got Little Big Man.” The men carefully hoisted the freed pole, and laid it on the roof of the tank. The majority was covered in a slimy, brown sludge.

“I’m not sure I’d put that on my salad,” smiled Norman.

Edwards was incredulous at the obvious scam. “Amazing. Right in the middle of New York Harbor?”

“That’s the answer to question number two,” said Norman. “The first question is, how much did the bastard actually skim?”

Edwards shrugged his shoulders.

“Let’s start checking the other tanks,” said Norman.

“Boss, think about what you’re suggesting. There have got to be over a hundred tanks here. If we want a hard tally, we’d need a separate pole for each tank to be admissible evidence.” Norman concurred. White-collar crooks and their expensive defense attorneys were getting smarter. Cases frequently had to be dismissed based on technical violations of client Fourth-Amendment search-and-seizure rights.

“Well, at least we’ve got exhibit number one,” said Norman.

“Maybe,” cautioned Edwards. “It’s not like we had a search warrant.”

The men closed the tank, and headed down the steps. Suddenly there was the rumble of thunder, a few bolts of lightning, and the heavens opened. The pole slipped out of Norman’s hand and tumbled fifty or so feet to the muddy ground. By the time the two men reached terra firma, they were completely drenched.

Norman slammed the pole against the tank in frustration. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say that little grease ball just made a deal with the devil to give us the shaft.”

Chapter 2



June, 1906
Porto Empedocle, Sicily

Dominic Pasquale Gravenese was born in the tiny seaside town of Porto Empedocle in southern Sicily. Dominic barely finished grammar school.

According to some very sketchy records, the place had 6,000 residents, one coffee bar, and a hall of records where births, marriages and deaths were registered. Most of the men worked in some aspect of the local fishing industry.

Dominic, 15, would have none of that fishing stuff. Too many hard hours, too little cash. He decided he would become a successful business-person. After thinking about it for a while, Dominic decided to invest his modest savings in a traveling retail store: wooden horse cart lined with straw and hay that carried a half dozen pieces of genuine Deruta ceramic.

As every Italian knew, Deruta dishes and plates, made at the family's centuries-old factory in Central Umbria — about 650 miles north of Empedocle — were Italy's finest and most expensive. Every family aspired to own a few pieces, if only to pass them from one generation to the next.

Six days a week, Dominic would travel to different area markets, and set up shop. He would artfully display his pieces on the bed of straw. To attract shoppers, he tied a large red, green and white sign to the rear of the cart that proudly proclaimed, "Deruta for Less."

When the shoppers gathered, he would explain, he had made a deal with the Deruta family. They sold him some of their best pieces that had small, virtually invisible blemishes. "The Deruta's want local Italian families to own at big discount, rather than sell them to greedy, wealthy tourists."

Dominic was charming and persuasive. Most shoppers wanted to buy then and there. He explained that was not the way the family wanted the process to work. "To protect the Deruta reputation,

you select and pay in advance. Dominic come back three to four weeks later with your order.”

“How I know you don’t steal my money?” demanded a skeptical woman. Dominic’s response was vintage medicine man. “Dominic steal? Signora, I have a family. A reputation. Name one person who says I steal?”

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There was a reason it took three to four weeks for Dominic to deliver the ceramics. Dominic had made an exclusive deal with his cousin Bruno Salerno of Partimico, another tiny Sicilian town about 30 kilometers away, to copy and produce quality Deruta ceramic knockoffs.

Bruno had exacting standards. Each piece had to be good enough to fool the Deruta family. That kind of craftsmanship took time. From time to time, the men would argue about the importance of volume and speed over quality. “We can sell much more, make more money,” Dominic would argue. Bruno would counter, “When you steal, it must so good nobody complain.” Bruno always prevailed.

In time, Dominic made Bruno his equal partner. For the next three years, business boomed. One day Bruno discovered he wasn’t that equal. Dominic had manipulated their records. Best Bruno could determine, he actually received about 25 percent of the profits.

Shortly thereafter, the Provincial Polizia received an anonymous tip about Dominic’s knockoff

business. Fortunately, one of the local Polizia that Dominic bribed was able to alert him the night before the Polizia planned to make a surprise appearance.

Dominic stuffed a small bag with cash and a change of clothes, and disappeared into the night. Days later he boarded a passenger ship in the Port of Naples. He was off to America to make a new life. A life filled with good fortune, good health, and a woman to love.

As he stood on the ship's deck with the salt air filling his nostrils, he had time to reflect on his first business venture. He concluded the snitch could have only been Bruno.

He vowed to never again completely trust anyone in business. Only he would know what he was doing, and how and why he was doing it.

Chapter 3



April, 1910
Little Italy, NYC

The 18-year old Dominic arrived at Ellis Island in the Spring of 1910, and was quickly drawn to Little Italy, the home of many Italian immigrants.

As Dominic would tell friends later, Little Italy “was our kind...in the beginning.” The neighborhood stretched east from the Bowery to Old Broadway, and north from Canal to Houston Street.

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Dominic settled in a one-bedroom tenement flat at 80 Spring Street. To local residents, Dominic appeared to be a charming, hardworking entrepreneur with a little working capital and a lot of big dreams. After walking the neighborhood and observing what and how people bought, he decided to go into the retail fish business. He would sell directly to local residents from a big red cart with large wooden wheels.

Six days a week, he would leave his tiny flat at 2 a.m. and travel to the wholesale markets near Fulton Street. There he would select what he thought was the best fish at the best price. He'd then pile his inventory on a bed of glistening chopped ice and return to Little Italy.

Each day he moved his red cart to a different location until he was confident he identified those with the best sales potential. To mark his arrival, he would shout in a deep, confident voice, "Come and get it. Dominic here with the freshest fish this side of heaven. Look out the window ladies, see for yourself."

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One sunny Tuesday in August, Philomena Bonniello, a beautiful young woman with a soft olive complexion, long brown curls and a straw hat, joined her mother, Concetta, on what had become a daily negotiation with Dominic.

Concetta, friendly, weathered, short and squatty, had migrated to New York with her husband and daughter from the agricultural village of Benevento, outside of Rome, about eight years before. When Concetta bought anything, she never took the first price. She knew it and Dominic knew it.

“I say Mrs. Bonniello, 15 cents a pound for fresh cod like stealing from the poor.”

“Too much.”

“But look in his eyes. They so clear. They saying, Mrs. Bonniello take me home. Make me family.”

“Ten cents, my best and last offer,” said Concetta firmly.

Philomena smiled at the exchange. Dominic looked into her dark brown eyes and melted. “Because you have the most beautiful daughter in all of Little Italy I give you your price this day, one condition.”

“And what is that?” replied Mrs. Bonniello, not expecting the answer she heard.

“You invite Dominic to dinner. I even give you the extra cod to cook...absolutely free.”

Philomena demurely rolled her eyes. Momma looked at her. She nodded. That was that. Their first official date was cappuccino and two chocolate chip cannolis at Ferrara’s pastry shop. Coffee quickly became lunch. Lunch became dinner. And dinner became a marriage proposal in front of Vincent’s Clam Bar on the corner of Hester and Mott.

On May 21, 1915 — ten months after they married — a son, Alfonso, arrived via a difficult, premature birth. Born under the astrological sign Taurus the Bull, he gestated in his mother's womb for just seven months and two weeks.

The doctor explained, "The good news, you are the parents of a healthy young boy. But, because he was born so premature, he may be smaller than the average as an adult."

Neither Dominic nor Philomena took mind. They were elated mother and baby were healthy. Dominic made it his business to play with Fonso at the end of each business day. By the time Fonso was three, the father-son routine was in full bloom. When Fonso woke from his afternoon nap, he would sit on the floor, legs crossed, waiting for his father, who arrived home about 4 p.m.

"Where is my little King?" Dominic would ask with arms outstretched. The men would then play games until Philomena announced dinner was ready.

As events unfolded, Philomena was unable to have any additional children, and Dominic did not want to adopt. "I am not raising a child who is not my blood," he roared whenever Philomena raised the subject.

It also turned out the doctor was right about Alfonso. He was diminutive compared to the other neighborhood kids his age. He also had a squeaky, high-pitched voice. That was only the half of it. By the time Alfonso — now nicknamed *Fonso* — was five

years old, he had developed a chronic vision problem called amblyopia, caused by an acute misalignment of the left eye. When Fonso stared straight ahead, one eye was normal while the other moved uncontrollably from side to side. The only known solutions at the time were frequent visits to an ophthalmologist, experimental eyes drops from Europe, individually supervised ocular physical therapy sessions, and specially formulated glasses. The sum total was quite a bit of money. Consequently, Dominic knew had to find a way to increase his income. His first instinct was to sell more types of fish. The change in strategy helped a bit, but was still not enough to provide the lifestyle he wanted for himself and his family. Despite their difficult times, Philomena never complained.

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One evening after dinner, Dominic sat quietly in the corner, reading his newspaper and sipping a glass of grappa. Grappa is a popular, bitter Italian digestive made by distilling skins, pulp, seeds and stems in grain alcohol. The clear liquid is reminiscent of paint thinner.

Dominic noticed an interesting success story in the business section of the popular New York *Journal American* newspaper. The CEO of Mobil Mystery Oil talked about how he had increased company profitability by developing supplemental income streams. In other words, motor oil remained his primary product line, but he now also manufactured

related automotive products such as carburetor cleaners and fuel additives, using his existing production machinery and distribution channels.

That story became the basis for a distinctly Dominic supplemental income stream of revenue. Every time a customer bought fish, he would stuff about four ounces of ice — approximately one handful — in its mouth *before* he weighted it. Once the price was agreed, he would distract the customer with a charming casual comment. He would quickly pop the ice out then wrap the fish.

He estimated his new income stream increased his net income by 25 percent. The scheme worked like a charm — the money started rolling in. Before long, all the doctor bills were current, new pieces of furniture dotted the apartment, and a brand new Philco radio with shiny big black dials sat in the far corner of the living room.

Philomena couldn't help but notice the sudden success. Dominic said nothing, and Philomena chose not to ask.

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Fonso, never a great student to begin with, volunteered to help his father after school. Initially, Philomena resisted. She wanted her son to get a good education. “Education gives people opportunity,” she said.

Fonso had a more persuasive argument for his father. “Papa, why pay a perfect stranger? I'll do for less. And we'll keep the money in the family.”

At first Fonso just cleaned the cart at the end of each day. Dominic assumed Fonso had no idea about his little scheme until the day...

One of his regular customers, Mrs. Benuto, approached Dominic's cart. Mrs. Benuto was a brute of a woman who looked as if she could carry a thousand raviolis in one hand. She prowled the neighborhood with a scowl on her face that could make a wild lion flee in fear.

Mrs. Benuto had just ordered about ten pounds of codfish from Dominic for the Sunday family dinner. "These over here are the best," she pointed. Dominic turned his back to his customer, picked up the fish, and quickly stuffed some crushed ice in its mouth. Fonso's eyes bugged out of his head.

"Dominic, what's taking so long," said Mrs. Benuto. "Patience, Mrs. Benuto. I am taking the fin off before I weight. I do that for good customers."

She smiled, not realizing how close she'd come to discovery.

Fonso realized interruptions could seriously derail Papa's narrow time-to-stuff window. He decided to help by creating an entertaining diversion for Mrs. Benuto and the other women standing in line.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he barked. "Today I would like to show you my latest yo-yo trick." He took his hat off and tossed it to the ground. "First, I will fully extend my string, then make Charlie — I call my yo-yo Charlie — dance along the sidewalk to

the song *Whistle a Happy Tune*. When he's finished dancing he will rest in the hat."

A smiling Mrs. Benuto turned to watch. "You take care of me, Dominic, I want to watch your little boy." She melted as Fonso charmed the crowd with his song-and-dance routine. Papa jammed more ice into the fish, weighed and wrapped it in newspaper, and marked the price with a big black crayon.

When Fonso finished, he bowed, and bent over to pick up his hat. A smiling Ms. Benuto placed a quarter in the hat. "Nice boy." The others followed suit. Fonso was genuinely surprised.

"That is very nice of you, but I can't take..."

"Sometimes," said Mrs. Benuto, "when you ask little, you get more." Fonso would remember that lesson years later. Fonso smiled. Mrs. Benuto had done just the opposite. She paid a 30 percent premium for the fish, not including Fonso's tip.

After Mrs. Benuto left, Dominic proudly put his arm around Fonso, "I think you're now a partner."

The more hours Fonso worked, the more songs he added to his little show, songs like *East Side-West Side* and in the *Good Old Summer Time*.