

Salami Joe

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The rain came down in torrents. Throughout the fall, winter, and spring it never seemed to stop. Then it got hot, then it got dry, and the winds blew and blew. Then the dust came, swirling the rich, dry topsoil into the air. It settled everywhere. It was useless to sweep the floors of the house, as the dust would pile up on the floor, furniture, in the closets, on the clothing, and in every imaginable place you could think of, sometimes in less than an hour after the house was totally cleaned. Taking a shower was called a mud bath.

Joe's grandfather had a huge ranch with two thousand head of cattle. Little Joe grew up in Bonham, Texas, and had ridden horses practically since the day he was born. He had deep brown eyes and long, dark hair that was cut when they sheared sheep every six months. His dad had been stomped into the ground in a cattle stampede, and his mother had disappeared into some dusty town down south, where the action was.

Joe was raised by his grandparents. The family made a lot of salami, mostly from inferior cattle, and stored it in the basement. The salami could be stored for months after curing and it was Joe's favorite snack. Usually, he would take a hunk of the salami and some hard bread with him when he went out on the

range to move cattle and find strays. Many times he would capture other ranchers' cattle and brand them with his ranch's brand. Joe especially liked to do this, sneaking around and stealing in the middle of the night, cutting the neighbors' fences, then patching them up after the stolen cattle were removed. It was hard, mischievous work with great rewards.

After the wind blew away the soil, there was nothing left to grow crops or raise cattle. When there was no food left, Joe and his grandparents lived on stored salami. Grandfather's remaining cattle starved to death or died of thirst.

At the age of nineteen, Joe headed to California. He knew nothing except raising cattle and got a job as a bartender in Hayward, California. He pocketed drink money when the boss wasn't looking. He wore his big white cowboy hat and large dark glasses to keep the Texas dust out — just in case another dust storm came along.

Joe was drafted into the US Army in 1942 and since he was good with horses, was assigned to the cavalry. Joe and his company paraded into big cities on holidays, for military funerals, special occasions, and recruiting parades, wearing military dress uniforms.

Inspection was once a week or whenever the sergeant felt like it. So, the soldiers continuously washed and groomed their horses in case Sarge sprung an inspection on them at a moment's

notice. All parts had to be cleaned. When Joe pulled back his stallion's foreskin, the horse grinned and extended his large penis.

On occasion, when the sergeant made a detailed, close-up inspection, he would yell, "Get that son-of-a-bitch clean, and I mean now! Report to me in an hour. I want to see that dick shining like a diamond."

Joe would have to reapply lanolin oil, and his horse would grin and shake as Joe rubbed. The second time around, he always passed inspection. Joe knew that the sergeant was sometimes fucking with him.

At the company canteen bar, Joe got a job as a bartender at night. When the sergeant appeared, as usual, Joe poured him a big glass of whiskey at no charge. After that, the sergeant left him alone and his horse wasn't so lucky.

Joe acquired the name "Salami Joe" in the service. Whether it was because he ate a lot of salami or because he cleaned the horse's dick, it stuck. Maybe it was both.

A week before Joe got out of the service, he got a letter from a realtor that read:

Dear Sir:

The Riggert Ranch is being sold in sixty days for overdue state taxes. If you are the owner or a close

relative, please call me. I have an interested party who would like to buy the property. If you are not the right party, please disregard this message.

Yours truly,

Frank Bowne Realtor Telephone-An 607-5321

Two months later, Joe received \$92,061.21 in the escrow closing after taxes. He thought he'd discovered a gold mine.

Joe looked around and found a bar called the Diamond Horseshoe and bought it. It was located in the Diamond district a small community in Oakland. Above the bar on the second story were ten, one-bedroom apartments. Joe installed a mini deli in the corner of the bar, and of course served his favorite salami hanging for all to see. Joe seemed to always carry a wad of salami in his pocket or on the seat of his new red-and-gold Cadillac, and had a large brahma steer horn mounted on the front of the hood.

One of his pals from the service stopped by the bar. "Salami Joe! How ya doin'?" That sealed the name in his new neighborhood. The name caught on.

Word came down a little later that the Riggert Ranch had struck oil. Joe picked up the newspaper at the drugstore and there it was, on the front page. RIGGERT RANCH STRIKES OIL,

ESTIMATED TO BE THE BIGGEST GUSHER IN MODERN HISTORY! There was a picture of the realtor, Frank Bowne, who had written him about the foreclosure a few months before. The picture showed a few other men, with Frank grinning while holding bottles of champagne, throwing money in the air with the oil gushing out of the ground from the tower behind them.

Joe knew he had been swindled and took off to Texas to level the playing field, only to end up beaten and battered and shot at a few times. He left with bullet holes in his shiny red-and-gold Cadillac.

Above the bar lived a sailor, Don Driver, who was soon being discharged from the Navy. Day and night he partied with women and friends, and of course, Jose's bar downstairs was his favorite haunt. Don and Salami Joe became great buddies. Joe's business was thriving, especially with Don and his friends spending wads of money across the bar counter.

Don had access to a lot of money. His parents were rich. Don and his brother were building triplexes using their dad's money and general contractor's license. After a few years, the brothers got their separate contractor's license and established their own business.

Don spent a lot of time at the Diamond Horseshoe. Joe was always doing deals. Don had a new truck and loved horses, and he

kept a horse in stables in the Oakland hills, where he rode occasionally.

One day at the bar, Joe told Don he had a beautiful silver saddle and a horse named Prancer. Joe took Don to his home, which was on two acres in the Oakland hills, where he kept two horses. "I only need one horse. You can have the palomino," Joe said.

Don went over and stroked the beautiful golden-colored horse and its pure white mane.

"Take it for a ride. I'll get the saddle," Joe offered, and the two men saddled the horse.

Don put his foot on the stirrup and hoisted his muscular five-foot-nine body up onto the horse and rode, his thin brown hair blowing in the breeze. The horse pranced and held its head high as the saddle sang out while it rubbed for a better position, adjusting on the horse's back and to Don's rear end.

"Whatta you think?"

"It's a fine horse," said Don, impressed.

"I have a beautiful silver saddle in my house that I want you to see."

There in the living room sat a shiny silver saddle that Joe had purchased at an auction a few weeks before for a bargain price, along with Jackie Boy the horse. Don rolled his hand over

the slick silver and the gold on the horn and front side of the saddle.

"I'll make you a deal - the horse and saddle for your truck," Joe said.

"Well, how about you hand me back \$200 and we got a deal."

"A deal, and you buy the drinks," said Salami Joe.

The truck had cost Don \$3,200. Joe had bought the saddle and horse for \$1,800, and Don spent the \$200 at Joe's bar, celebrating.

Joe was making a good living at his bar but wanted to go into business big time to make up for the millions of oil profits he thought he was entitled to. Don had a general contractor's license, and Joe started to pitch Don on building something big. Don's brother was building home subdivisions. Don was doing some remodeling and once in a while built a home for others on contract. Don's brother saved his money and put it in his business, making millions, and his business grew. Don left his profits on Salami Joe's bar.

Joe's father-in-law owned a small ranch in Riverbank, California, out in the country. He knew of some property in town across the street from the river. He knew that it was selling cheap but couldn't recall the exact price. Joe and Don went to Riverbank, a small town of only a couple hundred people. Joe roamed with Don and his father-in-law on his forty-acre cow

ranch. As Joe kicked at the dry turds on the ground, it brought back memories of his early days in Texas. He was thinking big. Excited, they all jumped into Joe's Cadillac and headed for the property to meet the realtor.

Don walked around the property, surveying how many houses he could put on it while the realtor and Joe's father-in-law tagged along. Joe leaned on his beloved Cadillac, smoking a cigar and dreaming of all the money he would make. He was starting to feel better about the oil loss, thinking that since this new venture was his big idea, he should get 75 percent of the profits.

"What ya think?" said Joe, blowing out a big puff of smoke as the others approached him.

"Not bad," said Don, quietly excited since it was his first subdivision. "I see no problems."

Pretty nice, thought Joe, thinking only about money without any idea of what he was getting into.

"I figure you could build seven houses here," said the realtor.

This was a big sale for him because he knew he would get the listing to sell the homes.

"I agree," said Don.

"How much will the owner take?" asked Joe.

"Well, he's askin' \$30,000, but I think you can get it for \$25,000."

"How about \$20,000?" said Joe, glaring through his large, dark glasses, puffing on his cigar, and crossing his legs like a big shot with his butt on the fender, his white cowboy hat casting a shadow across his face. A string tie hung below his collar, held together by a gold nugget that rested on his embroidered, blue cotton shirt. A thick, carved leather belt with a silver buckle held up his gray gabardine pants, which hung five inches above the soles of his snakeskin cowboy boots.

Within twenty-four hours, the owner accepted their offer. In truth, he would have sold the property for \$10,000 or less. Nobody around would buy it and the owner needed the money. He'd been trying to sell the property for five years. He'd once had an offer for \$6,000 and rejected it.

The owner of the property was the realtor's father. When the realtor saw these fat cats come to town from the big city, the price went up.

Now, this property was almost a price that Don could afford with Joe as a partner. Don, being broke as usual, approached his father — a rich drunk who owned silver mine in Virginia City, Nevada — for a loan; one of many he would not pay back.

"What's the matter with you? Your brother is successful and making lots of money and you're always broke. You haven't paid

back all the other money you borrowed from me. What the hell are you going to build out there in the sticks?"

"A home subdivision."

"Nobody is building out there. You won't sell a damned thing in that cow patch."

Don went back to Joe and told him he couldn't come up with the money for the land. Joe took back the silver saddle and bought the property, convincing the seller he would pay him \$6,000 down, and the rest as he sold each house plus six percent interest. The deal was done and Don had the land graded for seven houses. Joe borrowed \$8,000 through a loan on his father-in-law's ranch for the down payment, and pocketed \$2,000 upfront out of his father-in-law's loan proceeds. And he planned to take 65 percent of the profits.

Don somehow was able to buy a piss-ass house on a half acre out of town. Three months later, he rented out his five-bedroom house in Oakland and moved into the little two-bedroom house in Riverbank with three kids, a wife, two dogs, and Prancer the horse.

Not knowing anything about the building business, Salami Joe dreamed of making millions, being a big developer with a bigger percentage of the profits in the years to come.

Don brought out his two workers from Oakland, Jim Davidson and Larry Reed. Jim was a big, six-foot-four cowboy, originally

from Wyoming. He was rawboned with rough features and a permanently broken nose that was pushed to the side of his face. He grew up as an orphan with only a few years of schooling and had worked on the range from the age of eight. His family became the cowboys that he traveled with. He spoke out the side of his mouth with a heavy tongue and had terrible manners while eating, usually chewing a mouthful of food while talking at the same time. Jim was a gentle giant; a kind man who loved kids. He was married to Unis, a five-foot-tall, ninety-pound, slender woman. They had a little girl and Jim worshiped her.

Larry was six feet tall, had brown hair, and was slender. He talked like the actor Gary Cooper but had false teeth that fell out occasionally, sometimes when pounding nails on a hot day. Larry was single, his family living somewhere in Nevada.

Big Jim and Larry began digging the foundation of the first house. Don made out the lumber list and Joe made a deal getting the first load of lumber to the building site by hiring his unemployed cousin, Frank. Since Frank had no experience, Joe paid him a starvation wage. Jim and Larry watched suspiciously as the lumber was dumped; the weight of the lumber lifted the truck high in the air, slamming it back down hard, breaking the axel and sending the driver to the hospital for a week's recovery.

Don contracted with Kelly's Lumber in Riverbank to deliver the rest of the lumber. Frank became the labor and dug the rest of the ditches, and worked on the project wearing a back support brace, nursing his sore back. Every time Frank tried to rest or hide, Jim would yell for more material. It was constant punishment without a break.

"Where the hell ya been? We need some 2 x 4 studs," he'd say. Or whatever was needed. Frank would groan, straighten out his back, and head for the lumber pile.

Every Wednesday on payday, Don, Jim, and Larry went to the local watering hole and rolled dice; the loser paid for the drinks. Frank finished out the rest of the day and night lying on his back, still recovering.

Don helped Jim and Larry lift up a large exterior wall that they had just finished framing. (Nailing together) While lifting the wall, Don stumbled. The wall fell forward and kicked up a loose eight-foot-long 2 x 4, which caught Don in the nuts as it bounced up.

Jim stared down at Don. "God damn it, can't you get out of your own way?"

Don rolled around like his balls had torn from their sack. "You son-of-a-bitch! It isn't funny."

"Does it hurt?"

"Fuck you." Don left the job site, walking bowlegged and gently rubbing his crotch.

On Fridays, Don made the eighty-five-mile trip back to Oakland to discuss business with Salami Joe at the Diamond Horseshoe. The only thing that got done was emptying the booze bottles and lining Joe's pockets. Don spent the occasional weekend with his ex-wife, when her husband wasn't around (who happened to be living in Oakland).

Kelly, who owned the lumber company, was in his prime. Lumber for seven houses was a big deal for a small lumber company in this city and county, and doubled his business. On occasion, a bottle of good whiskey to Don kept his lumber rolling out. In the meantime, Joe was complaining because, without Don's knowledge, he was making a 20 percent commission on the lumber his cousin had delivered and expected more deliveries from his sources to line his pockets.

The wrecked truck from the first lumber delivery was paid for out of the building funds, which left them short of money to finish the last house. Joe, was afraid of not making his 65 percent profit on all seven houses that Don and he had agreeded on, loaned out the extra amount to complete the construction.

Jim and Larry banged away with some help, framing house after house. Larry rented a room in a house just down the street. Jim lived in a trailer on the job site. On the weekends,

Jim would take off for Stockton, about seventy-five miles away, to be with Unis and his beloved daughter. He would leave a paid half-hour early since Don was already at the bars in Oakland.

Well, thought Larry, I might as well take off too.

Jim sometimes took off for Stockton during the week to see Unis. One afternoon, after getting little sleep the night before after seeing Unis, he fell asleep on top of a ladder and was found by Larry in the morning, snoring away high above.

As the first few homes were completed, Salami Joe made a visit. "Were selling too cheap," he said. "We need to raise the price \$500 more."

"All right," said Don. "We can always reduce the price if we need to."

That weekend, Don stayed home in Riverbank. There was a big parade in Modesto, a town of 11,000 people, fifteen miles away. He rode his horse Prancer with the International Foot Printers Association, a city-slicker horse owners' association that he belonged to. His large white five-gallon cowboy hat kept the sun away from his eyes above his fancy, shiny, black-and-white Foot Printers shirt and black pants with a white stripe down each side. He sat on the silver saddle, which he had borrowed from Salami Joe.

Prance's pure white mane flowed in the slight wind as the horse brought his front legs high, dancing sideways and forward

down the street. Don's fellow members followed the local cowboys. This was the first time he had ridden Prancer in six months. He'd made his son scrub and clean the shit stains off the horse from not cleaning the horse's four-foot-wide stall, where the green shit had piled up and formed around the horse leaving his body image behind.

When some of the houses were completed, the realtor put up for sale signs, but only a few people showed up, mostly just the curious locals from town. Nothing happened. Months went by and there were no sales. The bank began hollering for their money.

They finally lowered the price. Joe screamed that he was losing money and blamed Don. Don moved back to Oakland, taking his family with him.

With Joe's resentment, the price was lowered to below the cost to build. Still no sales. The bank filed for foreclosure. Don filed bankruptcy. Don's new drinking hole was the Blue Inn and Dee Club in Oakland, where he drowned himself in whiskey.

The bank was owed \$46,000 and the realtor tried to sell the houses for what was owed. The realtor's father was going to lose the \$14,000 due him because the bank held the first note that would clean out any claims of money due. He had received \$6,000 up front, which was as much as he had expected in the first place, but thinking of the \$14,000 he expected to make, he made

a deal with the bank to buy the bank note for half of what was owed, paying 23,000 for seven new houses.

Joe's big money-making dream was in the dumps and his father-in-law lost his ranch. The bank turned around and sued Salami Joe for the \$23,000 for the remaining amount that they were owed. Joe lost his bar, because he had used it for collateral for the loan. He was out of money and sold his Cadillac.

Joe wanted the silver saddle back, but Don found out that Joe had cheated him, and took the saddle back to his new house in Oakland. It was displayed in the living room, where his son had the job of shining the silver and gold every month.

Before departing from his bar for the last time, Joe rescued his salami, still hanging over the back of the bar, with a few flies making their claim. Joe got a job at the local Cadillac dealership, and was back in the seat of a red Cadillac, driving potential buyers around. One day after the customers departed, Joe decided to go for a spin on his own. Before leaving the car lot he placed his large Brahma bull horn in the trunk. When he got around the corner he parked and mounted it on the front of the vehicle, then drove the car down the street as if he owned it. It felt good, he dreamed of owning oil wells.

