



*bloomsbury film classics*

NICHOLAS PILEGGI

# GOODFELLAS



# **GoodFellas**

Nicholas Pileggi

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## Introduction

On Tuesday, May 22, 1980, a man named Henry Hill did what seemed to him the only sensible thing to do: he decided to cease to exist. He was in the Nassau County jail, facing a life sentence in a massive narcotics conspiracy. The federal prosecutors were asking him about his role in the \$6 million Lufthansa German Airlines robbery, the largest successful cash robbery in American history. The New York City police were in line behind the feds to ask him about the ten murders that followed the Lufthansa heist. The Justice Department wanted to talk to him about his connection with a murder that also involved Michele Sindona, the convicted Italian financier. The Organized Crime Strike Force wanted to know about the Boston College basketball players he had bribed in a point-shaving scheme. Treasury agents were looking for the crates of automatic weapons and Claymore mines he had had stolen from a Connecticut armory. The Brooklyn district attorney's office wanted information about a body they had found in a refrigeration truck which was frozen so stiff it needed two days to thaw before the medical examiner could perform an autopsy.

When Henry Hill had been arrested only three weeks earlier, it hadn't been big news. There were no front-page stories in the newspapers and no segments on the evening news. His arrest was just another of dozens of the slightly exaggerated multimillion-dollar drug busts that police make annually in their search for paragraphs of praise. But the arrest of Henry Hill was a prize beyond measure. Hill had grown up in the mob. He was only a mechanic, but he knew everything. He knew how it worked. He knew who oiled the machinery. He knew, literally, where the bodies were buried. If he talked, the police knew that Henry Hill could give them the key to dozens of indictments and convictions. And even if he didn't talk, Henry Hill knew that his own friends would kill him just as they had killed nearly everyone who had been involved in the Lufthansa robbery. In jail Henry heard the news: his own protector, Paul Vario, the seventy-year-old mob chief in whose house Henry had been raised from childhood, was through with him; and James 'Jimmy the Gent' Burke, Henry's closest friend, his confidant and partner, the man he had been scheming and hustling with since he was thirteen years

old, was planning to murder him.

Under the circumstances, Henry made his decision: he became part of the Justice Department's Federal Witness Protection Program. His wife, Karen, and their children, Judy, fifteen, and Ruth, twelve, ceased to exist along with him. They were given new identities. It should be said that it was slightly easier for Henry Hill to cease to exist than it might have been for an average citizen, since the actual evidence of Hill's existence was extraordinarily slim. His home was apparently owned by his mother-in-law. His car was registered in his wife's name. His Social Security cards and driver's licenses – he had several of each – were forged and made out to fictitious names. He had never voted and he had never paid taxes. He had never even flown on an airplane using a ticket made out in his own name. In fact one of the only pieces of documentary evidence that proved without doubt that Henry Hill had lived – besides his birth certificate – was his yellow sheet, the police record of arrests he had begun as a teenage apprentice to the mob.

A year after Henry Hill's arrest I was approached by his attorney, who said that Hill was looking for someone to write his story. At that point I had been writing about organized-crime figures for most of my career as a journalist and had gotten bored with the egomaniacal ravings of illiterate hoods masquerading as benevolent Godfathers. In addition, I had never heard of Henry Hill. In my office are four boxes of index cards upon which I compulsively jot the names and various details of every major and minor organized-crime figure I run across in the press or court dockets. When I looked in it I discovered I had a card on Hill, dated from 1970 and misidentifying him as a member of the Joseph Bonanno crime family. And yet, from the mountain of data the feds had begun to compile about him since his arrest a year earlier and the importance they attached to him as a witness, it was clear that Henry Hill was at least worth meeting.

Since he was in the Federal Witness Program, the meeting had to take place at a location where his safety was guaranteed. I was instructed to meet two federal marshals at the Braniff counter at LaGuardia Airport. When I got there the two men had my ticket in their hands. They asked if I had to go to the bathroom. It struck me as a bizarre question coming from federal agents, but they explained that once they gave me the ticket I could not leave their sight until we boarded the plane. They couldn't take the chance that I might see the destination and tip someone off as to where I was going. As it turned out, the plane we took was not a Braniff plane, and the first place we landed

was not the place where Henry Hill was waiting. It took more than one flight that day to finally get to a town where, I learned later, Hill and his federal agent bodyguards had arrived just a couple of hours earlier.

Hill was a surprising man. He didn't look or act like most of the street hoods I had come across. He spoke coherently and fairly grammatically. He smiled occasionally. He knew a great deal about the world in which he had been raised, but he spoke about it with an odd detachment, and he had an outsider's eye for detail. Most of the mobsters who have been interviewed for books and articles over the years have been unable to detach themselves from their experiences long enough to put their lives in some perspective. They so blindly followed the mobster's path that they rarely saw any of the scenery along the way. Henry Hill was all eyes. He was fascinated by the world in which he had grown up, and there was very little about it that he did not remember.

Henry Hill was a hood. He was a hustler. He had schemed and plotted and broken heads. He knew how to bribe and he knew how to con. He was a full-time working racketeer, an articulate hoodlum from organized crime, the kind of *rara avis* that should please social anthropologists as much as cops. On the street he and his friends referred to each other as wiseguys. It seemed to me that a book about his life might provide an insider's look at a world usually heard about either from the outside or from the *capo di tutti capi*, top.

## Chapter One

Henry Hill was introduced to life in the mob almost by accident. In 1955, when he was eleven years old, he wandered into a drab, paint-flecked cabstand at 391 Pine Street, near Pitkin Avenue, in the Brownsville-East New York section of Brooklyn, looking for a part-time, after-school job. The one-story, storefront cabstand and dispatch office was directly across the street from where he lived with his mother, father, four older sisters, and two brothers, and Henry had been intrigued by the place almost as far back as he could remember. Even before he went to work there Henry had seen the long black Cadillacs and Lincolns glide into the block. He had watched the expressionless faces of the cabstand visitors, and he always remembered their huge, wide coats. Some of the visitors were so large that when they hauled themselves out of their cars, the vehicles rose by inches. He saw glittering rings and jewel-studded belt buckles and thick gold wrist bands holding wafer-thin platinum watches.

The men at the cabstand were not like anyone else from the neighborhood. They wore silk suits in the morning and would drape the fenders of their cars with handkerchiefs before leaning back for a talk. He had watched them double-park their cars and never get tickets, even when they parked smack in front of a fire hydrant. In the winter he had seen the city's sanitation trucks plow the snow from the cabstand's parking lot before getting around to cleaning the school yard and hospital grounds. In the summer he could hear the noisy all-night card games, and he knew that no one – not even Mr. Mancuso, who lived down the block and grouched about everything – would dare to complain. And the men at the cabstand were rich. They flashed wads of twenty-dollar bills as round as softballs and they sported diamond pinky rings the size of walnuts. The sight of all that wealth, and power, and girth was intoxicating.

At first Henry's parents were delighted that their energetic young son had found a job just across the street. Henry's father, Henry Hill Sr., a hardworking construction company electrician, always felt youngsters should work and learn the value of the money they were forever demanding. He had seven children to support on an electrical worker's salary, so any additional



income was welcome. Since he was twelve years old, when he had come to the United States from Ireland shortly after his own father died, Henry Hill Sr. had had to support his mother and three younger brothers. It was work at an early age, he insisted, that taught young people the value of money. American youngsters, unlike the children of his native Ireland, seemed to dawdle about in their adolescence much longer than necessary.

Henry's mother, Carmela Costa Hill, was also delighted that her son had found a job nearby but for different reasons. First, she knew that her son's job would please his father. Second, she hoped that the after-school job might get her feisty young son out of the house long enough to keep him from bickering incessantly with his sisters. Also, with young Henry working, she would have more time to spend with Michael, her youngest son, who had been born with a spinal defect and was confined to either his bed or a wheelchair. Carmela Hill was further pleased – almost ecstatic, really – when she found that the Varios, the family who owned the cabstand, came from the same part of Sicily where she had been born. Carmela Costa had been brought to the United States as a small child, and she had married the tall, handsome, black-haired young Irish lad she had met in the neighborhood at the age of seventeen, but she never lost her ties to the country of her birth. She always maintained a Sicilian kitchen, for instance, making her own pasta and introducing her young husband to anchovy sauce and *calamari* after throwing out his catsup bottle. She still believed in the religious powers of certain western Sicilian saints, such as Santa Pantaleone, the patron saint of toothaches. And like many members of immigrant groups, she felt that people with ties to her old country somehow had ties with her. The idea of her son's getting his first job with *paesani* was the answer to Carmela's prayers.

It wasn't too long, however, before Henry's parents began to change their minds about their son's after-school job. After the first couple of months they found that what had started out as a part-time job for their son had become a full-time compulsion. Henry junior was always at the cabstand. If his mother had an errand for him to run, he was at the cabstand. He was at the cabstand in the morning before going to school and he was at the cabstand in the afternoon when school let out. His father asked about his homework. 'I do it at the cabstand,' he said. His mother noticed that he was no longer playing with youngsters his own age. 'We play at the cabstand,' he said.

‘My father was always angry. He was born angry. He was angry that he had to work so hard for next to nothing. Electricians, even union electricians, didn’t earn much in those days. He was angry that the three-bedroom house was so noisy, with my four sisters and two brothers and me. He used to scream that all he wanted was peace and quiet, but by then we’d all be like mice and he’d be the only one screaming and yelling and banging dishes against the wall. He was angry that my brother Michael should have been born paralyzed from the waist down. But mostly he was angry about me hanging around the cabstand. “They’re bums!” he used to scream. “You’re gonna get in trouble!” he’d yell. But I’d just pretend I didn’t know what he was talking about and say that all I was doing was running errands after school instead of running bets, and I’d swear that I was going to school when I hadn’t been near the place in weeks. But he never bought it. He knew what really went on at the cabstand, and every once in a while, usually after he got his load on, I’d have to take a beating. But by then I didn’t care. Everybody has to take a beating sometime.’

Back in 1955 the Euclid Avenue Taxicab and Limousine Service in the Brownsville-East New York section of Brooklyn was more than just a dispatch center for neighborhood cabs. It was a gathering place for horseplayers, lawyers, bookies, handicappers, ex-jockeys, parole violators, construction workers, union officials, local politicians, truck drivers, bookmakers, policy runners, bail bondsmen, out-of-work waiters, loan sharks, off-duty cops, and even a couple of retired hit men from the old Murder Incorporated days. It was also the unofficial headquarters for Paul Vario, a rising star in one of the city’s five organized-crime families and the man who ran most of the rackets in the area at the time. Vario had been in and out of jail all his life. In 1921, at the age of eleven, he had served a seven-month stretch for truancy, and over the years he had been arrested for loan-sharking, burglary, tax evasion, bribery, bookmaking, contempt, and assorted assaults and misdemeanors. As he got older and more powerful, most of the charges brought against him were dismissed, either because witnesses failed to appear or because very generous judges chose to fine rather than jail him. (Brooklyn Supreme Court Judge Dominic Rinaldi, for instance, once fined him \$250 on bribery and conspiracy charges that could have sent him away for fifteen years.) Vario tried to maintain a modest amount of decorum in a neighborhood known for mayhem. He abhorred unnecessary violence (the kind he hadn’t ordered), mainly because it was bad

for business. Bodies deposited haphazardly on the streets always made trouble and annoyed the police, who at that time could generally be relied upon to be reasonably complacent about most mob matters.

Paul Vario was a large man, standing six feet tall and weighing over 240 pounds, and appeared even larger than he was. He had the thick arms and chest of a sumo wrestler and moved in the lumbering manner of a big man who knew that people and events would wait for him. He was impervious to fear, impossible to surprise. If a car backfired or someone called his name, Paul Vario's head would turn, but slowly. He seemed invulnerable. Deliberate. He exuded the sort of lethargy that sometimes accompanies absolute power. It wasn't that Vario couldn't move swiftly if he wanted to. Henry had once seen him grab a sawed-off baseball bat from his car and chase a nimbler man up five flights of stairs to collect a loan-shark debt. But usually Vario was reluctant to exert himself. At twelve Henry began running Paul Vario's errands. Soon he was getting Vario his Chesterfield cigarettes and coffee – black, no cream, no sugar – and delivering his messages. Henry got in and out of Paulie's black Impala two dozen times a day when they made their rounds of meetings throughout the city. While Vario waited behind the wheel Henry would bring supplicants and peers to the car for their conversations.

'On 114th Street in East Harlem, where the old guys were suspicious of their own noses, they used to look at me through their slit eyes whenever Paulie brought me into the clubs. I was a little kid and they acted like I was a cop. Finally, when one of them asked Paulie who I was, he looked back at them like they were nuts. "Who is he?" Paulie said. "He's a cousin. He's blood." From then on even the mummies smiled.

'I was learning things and I was making money. When I'd clean out Paulie's boat I'd not only get paid but I'd also get to spend the rest of the day fishing. All I had to do was keep Paulie and the rest of the guys aboard supplied with cold beer and wine. Paulie had the only boat in Sheepshead Bay without a name. Paulie never had his name on anything. He never even had his name on a doorbell. He never had a telephone. He hated phones. Whenever he was arrested he always gave his mother's Hemlock Street address. He had boats his whole life and he never named one of them. He always told me, "Never put your name on anything!" I never did.

'I got to know what Paul wanted even before he did. I knew how to be there and how to disappear. It was just inside me. Nobody taught me

anything. Nobody ever said, “Do this,” “Don’t do that.” I just knew. Even at twelve I knew. After a couple of months, I remember, Paul was in the cabstand and some guys from out of the neighborhood came for a talk. I got up to walk away. I didn’t have to be told. There were other guys hanging around too, and we all got up to leave. But just then Paulie looks up. He sees that I’m leaving. “It’s okay,” he says, smiling at me, “you can stay.” The other guys kept walking. I could see that they were afraid to even look around, but I stayed. I stayed for the next twenty-five years.’

When Henry started working at the cabstand, Paul Vario ruled over Brownsville-East New York like an urban rajah. Vario controlled almost all of the illegal gambling, loan-sharking, labor rackets, and extortion games in the area. As a ranking member of the Lucchese crime family Vario had the responsibility for maintaining order among some of the city’s most disorderly men. He assuaged grievances, defused ancient vendettas, and settled disputes between the stubborn and the pigheaded. Using his four brothers as his emissaries and partners, Vario secretly controlled several legitimate businesses in the area, including the cabstand. He owned the Presto Pizzeria, a cavernous restaurant and pizza stand on Pitkin Avenue, around the corner from the cabstand. There Henry first learned to cook; there he learned how to tot up a comptroller’s ribbon for the Vario policy bank that used the pizzeria’s basement as its accounting room. Vario also owned the Fountainbleu Florist, on Fulton Street, about six blocks from the cabstand. There Henry learned to twist wires onto the flowers of elaborate funeral wreaths ordered for departed members of the city’s unions.

Vario’s older brother, Lenny, was a construction union official and ex-bootlegger who had the distinction of once having been arrested with Lucky Luciano. Lenny, who was partial to wraparound sunglasses and highly buffed nails, was Paul’s liaison to local building contractors and construction company managers, all of whom paid tribute in either cash or no-show jobs to guarantee that their building sites would remain free of both strikes and fires. Paul Vario was the next oldest. Tommy Vario, who was the third oldest in the family, was also a union delegate for construction workers and had a record of several arrests for running illegal gambling operations. Tommy oversaw Vario’s bookmaking and loansharking operations at dozens of construction sites. The next in order, Vito Vario, also known as ‘Tuddy,’ ran the cabstand where Henry first went to work. It was Tuddy Vario who hired Henry the day the youngster walked into the cabstand. Salvatore ‘Babe’

Vario, the youngest of the brothers, ran the floating card and dice games in apartments, school basements, and the backs of garages every night and twice a day on weekends. Babe was also in charge of accommodating, or paying off, the local cops to guarantee peaceful games.

All the Vario brothers were married and lived in the neighborhood, and they all had children, some of them Henry's age. On weekends the Vario brothers and their families usually gathered at their mother's house (their father, a building superintendent, had died when they were young), where raucous afternoons of card games and an ongoing banquet of pasta, veal, and chicken dishes emerged from the senior Mrs. Vario's kitchen. For Henry there was nothing as exciting or as much fun as the noise and games and food on those afternoons. There was an endless procession of Vario friends and relatives who came marching through his life, most of them stuffing folded dollar bills inside his shirt. There were pinball machines in the cellar and pigeons on the roof. There were trays of *cannoli*, the cream-filled Italian pastries, sent over as gifts, and tubs of lemon ice and *gelato*.

'From the first day I walked into the cabstand I knew I had found my home – especially after they found out that I was half Sicilian. Looking back, I can see that everything changed when they found out about my mother. I wasn't just another kid from the neighborhood helping out around the stand. I was suddenly in their houses. I was in their refrigerators. I was running errands for the Vario wives and playing with their kids. They gave me anything I wanted.

'Even before going to work at the cabstand I was fascinated by the place. I used to watch them from my window, and I dreamed of being like them. At the age of twelve my ambition was to be a gangster. To be a wiseguy. To me being a wiseguy was better than being president of the United States. It meant power among people who had no power. It meant perks in a working-class neighborhood that had no privileges. To be a wiseguy was to own the world. I dreamed about being a wiseguy the way other kids dreamed about being doctors or movie stars or firemen or ballplayers.'

Suddenly, Henry found, he could go anywhere. He no longer had to wait in line at the local Italian bakery for fresh bread on Sunday mornings. The owner would just come from around the counter and tuck the warmest loaves under his arm and wave him home. People no longer parked in the Hill driveway, although his father never had a car. One day neighborhood youngsters even carried his mother's groceries home. As far as Henry could

see there was no world like it, certainly no world he could ever have entered.

Tuddy (Vito) Vario, who ran the cabstand, had been looking for a sharp and speedy kid for weeks. Tuddy had lost his left leg in the Korean War, and even though he had adapted to his disability, he still couldn't move about as swiftly as he wished. Tuddy needed someone to help clean out the cabs and limos. He needed someone who could run around to the Presto Pizzeria in a pinch and deliver pies. He needed someone whom he could send to the tiny four-stool bar and grill he owned two blocks away to clean out the register, and he needed someone smart enough to get sandwich orders straight and fast enough to bring the coffee back hot and the beer cold. Other youngsters, including his own son, Vito junior, had been hopeless. They dawdled. They moped. They lived in a fog. Sometimes one would take an order and disappear. Tuddy needed a sharp kid who knew his way around. A kid who wanted to hustle. A kid who could be trusted.

Henry Hill was ideal. He was quick and he was smart. He ran errands faster than anyone had ever run errands before, and he got the orders right. For a buck apiece he cleaned out the taxicabs and limousines (the limos were used for local funerals, weddings, and delivering high rollers to Vario card and dice games), and then he cleaned them out again for free. Tuddy was so pleased with Henry's seriousness and dispatch that after Henry's first two months at the cabstand he began teaching him how to jockey the cabs and limos around the cabstand's parking lot. It was a glorious moment – Tuddy walking out of the cabstand carrying a phonebook so Henry could see over the dashboard, determined that the twelve-year-old would be driving cars at the end of the day. It actually took four days, but by the end of the week, Henry was tentatively edging the cabs and limousines between the water hose and the gas pumps. After six months Henry Hill was backing limos with inch-clearing accuracy and tire-squealing aplomb around the lot while his schoolmates watched in awe and envy from behind the battered wooden fence. Once Henry spotted his father, who had never learned to drive, spying on him from behind the fence. That night Henry waited for his father to mention his skill in driving, but the senior Hill ate dinner in silence. Henry of course knew better than to bring up the subject. The less said about his job at the cabstand the better.

'I was the luckiest kid in the world. People like my father couldn't understand, but I was part of something. I belonged. I was treated like I was a grown-up. I was living a fantasy. Wiseguys would pull up and toss me their

keys and let me park their Caddies. I couldn't see over the steering wheel and I'm parking Caddies.'

At twelve Henry Hill was making more money than he could spend. At first he would treat his classmates to galloping horse rides along the bridle paths of the Canarsie marshes. Sometimes he would pay for their day at Steeplechase Amusement Park, topping off the treat with a 260-foot parachute drop. In time, though, Henry grew bored with his schoolmates and tired of his own largesse. He soon learned that there were no heady rides on sweaty horses and no amusement parks he had ever seen that could match the adventures he encountered at the cabstand.

'My father was the kind of guy who worked hard his whole life and was never there for the payday. When I was a kid he used to say he was a "subwayman," and it made me want to cry. He helped organize the electrical workers' union, Local Three, and got flowers for his funeral. He worked on skyscrapers in Manhattan and housing projects in Queens, and we could never move out of our crummy three-bedroom house jammed with seven kids, one of them stuck in his bed with a bum spine. We had money to eat, but we never had extras. And every day I saw everyone else, not just the wiseguys, making a buck. My old man's life wasn't going to be my life. No matter how much he yelled at me, no matter how many beatings I took, I wouldn't listen to what he said. I don't think I even heard him. I was too busy learning about paydays. I was learning how to earn.

'And every day I was learning something. Every day I was making a dollar here and a dollar there. I'd listen to schemes and I watched guys score. It was natural. I was in the middle of the cabstand every day. Swag came in and out of that place all day long. There'd be a crate of stolen toasters to be fenced, hot cashmeres right off a truck, cartons of untaxed cigarettes hijacked off some cowboy truckers, who couldn't even complain to the cops. Pretty soon I was delivering policy slips to apartments and houses all over the neighborhood, where the Varios had guys with adding machines counting up the day's take. People used to rent a room in their apartment to the Varios for \$150 a week and a free phone. It was a good deal. The wiseguys took only two or three hours in the late afternoon to add up the policy bets on the adding machine tape and circle all the winners. Lots of times the places Paulie and the numbers guys rented belonged to the parents of the kids I went to school with. At first they were surprised to see me coming in with a shopping bag full of slips. They thought I was coming to play with their kids.

But pretty soon they knew who I was. They could see I was growing up different.

‘After I got my first few bucks and the nerve to go shopping without my mother, I went to Benny Field’s on Pitkin Avenue. That’s where the wise guys bought their clothes. I came out wearing a dark-blue pinstriped, double-breasted suit with lapels so sharp you could get arrested just for flashing them. I was a kid. I was so proud. When I got home my mother took one look at me and screamed, “You look just like a gangster!” I felt even better.’

At thirteen, Henry had worked a year at the cabstand. He was a handsome youngster with a bright, open face and a dazzling smile. His thick black hair was combed straight back. His dark-brown eyes were so sharp and bright that they glittered with excitement. He was slick. He had learned how to duck under his father’s angry swats, and he was a master at slipping away from the racetrack security guards, who insisted he was too young to hang around the clubhouse, especially on school days. From a distance he almost looked like a miniature of the men he so admired. He wore an approximation of their clothes, he tried to use their street-corner hand gestures, he ate their kind of *scungilli* and squid dishes though they made him retch, and he used to sip containers of boiling, bitter black coffee even though it tasted awful and burned his lips so badly he wanted to cry. He was a cardboard wise guy, a youngster dressed up for the mob. But he was also learning about that world, and there were no adolescent aspiring samurai or teenage Buddhist monks who took their indoctrination and apprenticeship more seriously.



## Chapter Two

‘I was around the stand from morning till night, and I was learning more and more every day. By the time I was thirteen I was collecting numbers and selling fireworks. I used to get the cab drivers to buy six-packs of beer for me, and then I’d sell them at a markup to the kids in the school yard. I was acting like a mini-fence for some of the neighborhood’s juvenile burglars. I’d front them the money and then sell the radio, portable, or box of sweaters they glommed to one of the guys around the cabstand.

‘Before big-money holidays like Easter and Mother’s Day, instead of going to school I’d go “cashing” with Johnny Mazzolla. Johnny, who lived across the street from the cabstand, was a junkie horseplayer, and every once in a while he would take me out and we’d go cashing counterfeit twenties he picked up from Beansie the counterfeiter in Ozone Park for ten cents on the dollar. We’d go from store to store, neighborhood to neighborhood, and Johnny would wait in the car and I’d run in and buy something for a buck or two with the fake twenty. Johnny taught me how to soften up the counterfeit bills with cold coffee and cigarette ashes the night before and leave them out to dry. He taught me to pretend I was in a hurry when I went up to the cashier. He also told me never to carry more than one bill on me at a time. That way, if you get caught, you can pretend that somebody passed it off on you. He was right. It worked. I was caught a couple of times, but I could always cry my way out. I was just a kid. I’d start to yell and cry and say I had to tell my mother what happened. That she’d beat me up for losing the money. Then I’d run out of the store fast as I could and we’d be off for another neighborhood. We’d usually get a couple of days in a neighborhood – until the twenties started showing up in the local banks and they’d alert the stores. Then the cashiers would have a list of the fake bills’ serial numbers tacked up right next to the register, and we’d have to change neighborhoods. At the end of a day’s cashing we’d have so many two-dollar purchases of doughnuts and cigarettes and razor blades and soap piled up in the back of the car we couldn’t see out the rear window.

‘At Christmas, Tuddy taught me how to drill holes in the trunks of junk Christmas trees he’d get for nothing, and then I’d stuff the holes with loose

branches. I'd stuff so many branches into those holes that even those miserable spindly trees looked full. Then we'd sell them for premium prices, usually at night and mostly around the Euclid Avenue subway stop. It took a day or two before the branches came loose and began to fall apart. The trees would collapse even faster once they were weighed down with decorations.

'We were always scheming. Everything was a scheme. Tuddy got me a job unloading deliveries at a high-class Italian food store just so I could toss the store's most expensive items through the windows of Tuddy's cabs, which he had parked strategically nearby. It wasn't that Tuddy or Lenny or Paul needed the stuff – the imported olive oil, prosciutto, or tuna fish. The Varios had more than enough money to buy the store a hundred times over. It was just that stuff that was stolen always tasted better than anything bought. I remember years later, when I was doing pretty well in the stolen credit-card business, Paulie was always asking me for stolen credit cards whenever he and his wife, Phyllis, were going out for the night. Paulie called stolen cards "Muldoons," and he always said that liquor tastes better on a Muldoon. The fact that a guy like Paul Vario, a *capo* in the Lucchese crime family, would even consider going out on a social occasion with his wife and run the risk of getting caught using a stolen card might surprise some people. But if you knew wiseguys you would know right away that the best part of the night for Paulie came from the fact that he was getting over on somebody. It wasn't the music or the floor show or the food – and he loved food – or even that he was going out with Phyllis, who he adored. The real thrill of the night for Paulie, his biggest pleasure, was that he was robbing someone and getting away with it.

'After I was at the cabstand about six months I began helping the Varios with the card and dice games they ran. I would spend the days with Bruno Facciolo assembling the crap game tables, which were just like the ones they have in Vegas. I spent my nights steering the high rollers from various pickup spots in the neighborhood, such as the candy store under the Liberty Avenue el or Al and Evelyn's delicatessen on Pitkin Avenue, to the apartments and storefronts where we were having games that night. A couple of times we had the games in the basement of my own school, Junior High School 149, on Euclid Avenue. Babe Vario bought the school custodian. I kept an eye out for cops, especially the plainclothesmen from the division or headquarters, who used to shake down the games in those days. I didn't have to worry too much about the local cops. They were already on the payroll. It

got so that I could always make a plainclothesman. They usually had their shirts outside their pants to cover their guns and handcuffs. They used the same dirty black Plymouths all the time. We even had their plate numbers. They had a way of walking through a block or driving a car that just said, "Don't fuck with me, I'm a cop!" I had radar for them. I knew.

'Those games were fabulous. There were usually between thirty and forty guys playing. We had rich garment-center guys. Businessmen. Restaurant owners. Bookmakers. Union guys. Doctors. Dentists. This was long before it was so easy to fly out to Vegas or drive down to Atlantic City for the night. There was also just about every wiseguy in the city coming to the games. The games themselves were actually run by professionals, but the Varios handled the money. They kept the books and the cashbox. The guys who ran the game got a flat fee or a percentage depending on the deal they cut. The people who ran the games for Paulie were the same kind of professionals who would run games in casinos or carnivals. The card games had professional dealers and the crap games had boxmen and stickmen, just like regular casinos. There were doormen – usually guys from the cabstand – who checked out everyone who got in the game, and there were loan sharks who worked for Paulie who picked up some of the action. Every pot was cut five or six percent for the house, and there was a bartender who kept the drinks coming.

'I used to make coffee and sandwich runs to Al and Evelyn's delicatessen until I realized I could make a lot more money if I made the sandwiches myself. It was a lot of work, but I made a few more bucks. I had only been doing that a couple of weeks when Al and Evelyn caught me on the street. They took me into the store. They wanted to talk to me, they said. Business was bad, they said. Since I started making sandwiches they had lost lots of the card game business. They had a deal. If I went back to buying the sandwiches from them, they'd cut me in for five cents on every card game dollar I spent. It sounded great, but I didn't jump at the opportunity. I wanted to savor it. I was being treated like an adult. "Awright," Al says, with Evelyn frowning at him, "seven cents on the dollar!" "Good," I said, but I was feeling great. It was my first kickback and I was still only thirteen.

'It was a glorious time. Wiseguys were all over the place. It was 1956, just before Apalachin, before the wiseguys began having all the trouble and Crazy Joey Gallo decided to take on his boss, Joe Profaci, in an all-out war. It was when I met the world. It was when I first met Jimmy Burke. He used

to come to the card games. He couldn't have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five at the time, but he was already a legend. He'd walk in the door and everybody who worked in the joint would go wild. He'd give the doorman a hundred just for opening the door. He shoved hundreds in the pockets of the guys who ran the games. The bartender got a hundred just for keeping the ice cubes cold. I mean, the guy was a sport. He started out giving me five bucks every time I got him a sandwich or a beer. Two beers, two five-dollar bills. Win or lose, the guy had money on the table and people got their tips. After a while, when he got to know me a little bit and he got to know that I was with Paul and the Varios, he started to give me twenty-dollar tips when I brought him his sandwich. He was sawbucking me to death. Twenty here. Twenty there. He wasn't like anyone else I had ever met. The Varios and most of the Italian guys were all pretty cheap. They'd go for a buck once in a while, but they resented it. They hated losing the green. Jimmy was from another world. He was a one-man parade. He was also one of the city's biggest hijackers. He loved to steal. I mean, he enjoyed it. He loved to unload the hijacked trucks himself until the sweat was pouring down his face. He must have knocked over hundreds of trucks a year, most of them coming and going from the airports. Most hijackers take the truck driver's license as a warning. The driver knows that you know where he lives, and if he cooperates too much with the cops or the insurance company he's in trouble. Jimmy got his nickname "Jimmy the Gent" because he used to take the driver's license, just like everybody else, except Jimmy used to stuff a fifty-dollar bill into the guy's wallet before taking off. I can't tell you how many friends he made out at the airport because of that. People loved him. Drivers used to tip off his people about rich loads. At one point things got so bad the cops had to assign a whole army to try to stop him, but it didn't work. It turned out that Jimmy made the cops his partners. Jimmy could corrupt a saint. He said bribing cops was like feeding elephants at the zoo. "All you need is peanuts."

'Jimmy was the kind of guy who cheered for the crooks in movies. He named his two sons Frank James Burke and Jesse James Burke. He was a big guy, and he knew how to handle himself. He looked like a fighter. He had a broken nose and he had a lot of hands. If there was just the littlest amount of trouble, he'd be all over you in a second. He'd grab a guy's tie and slam his chin into the table before the guy knew he was in a war. If the guy was lucky, Jimmy would let him live. Jimmy had a reputation for being wild.