**DINO PALAZZOLA’S EVEN MORE FAVORITE**

**CHRISTMAS, 2007**

-- Cocaine habit forming? Of course not. I ought to know. I’ve been using it for years.

Tallulah Bankhead, 1952

Dino Palazzola, age 18, found himself inadvertently in Athens, Georgia, on October 16 of 1983 hitchhiking on his way to Florida. He would never make it to Florida, or back to Wisconsin.

He had lived all his life in Wisconsin, except for a few months in Muskegon, Michigan, with his father. He was born and lived his early years in Oshkosh (By-Gosh), Wisconsin. His family, two brothers and two sisters, divorced parents, lived with his father—mother dead of alcoholism at 37. Family Services removed all five children from the home when Dino was 11, as the alcohol-addicted father, once a successful bookkeeper, could not keep a job and could not support the family. Five children were too many to place with one foster family, and they were split up.

Dino was placed with the Arthur and Judy Feldmans, a Christian family, with one boy and a girl of their own. This kind new family led to a miraculous and most positive change in Dino’s life. When I asked him to recall his best Christmas, he said, “It was when I was 11 and my first Christmas at the Feldman’s home. I didn’t expect any Christmas anymore, but they brought me clothes, a toy car I remember (I don’t have a car now) and a whole bunch of toys and things. That was my best. This year [2006] was pretty good, too.”

The reason Dino Palazzola was hitchhiking to Florida, at age 18, was that he had gone to live with his father, Mr. Palazzola, after serving two years in a juvenile detention center. His father did not really want him, except for his paycheck. “Whiskey river, take my mind, Whiskey river don’t run dry,” as Willie Nelson sang it, took most of his father’s mind during his waking hours and his river was seldom dry.

Thumbing down an automobile in Cleveland, Tennessee, on I-75, Dino found himself riding shotgun with a preacher from Athens, Georgia, not Athens, Tennessee, 25 mile northeast and also on I-75. Dino had slept the night before in the bushes next to the Higginbotham Administration Building on the campus of Lee College, now Lee University.

As Dino was traveling to the Sunshine State to seek work in the warm winter, this part-time Preacher man, a Rev. Charles Burke of the 16th Baptist Church, offered him some cash and a bedroom in his Athens home where he could rest up for a couple of days. Rev. Burke’s real job was to deliver Ford vans to dealers around Georgia. After Rev. Burke’s three-day absence, Dino obtained employment with a Mr. Anthony Bridges and his tree-trimming company, called Mobile saws. Dino would never see the kind Samaritan, Rev. Burke, again.

That is how Dino Palazzola got to Athens, where I would meet him standing in front of a car wash on Cedar Shoals Drive on January 27, 2007. He held a hand-lettered cardboard sign. It read: “Will Work for Food.” At the bottom was written “God bless.” I assumed that the postscript implied he was a good man, one simply down on his luck. I was right. I stopped and gave him $20. He was a nice man and effusively thanked me. I said, “I’ll take you to the Waffle House where we can get some lunch.” He eagerly jumped in.

One other time I saw a woman with such a sign as I pulled into the Alps Center shopping lot, next to Chili’s. I also gave her $20, whereupon a man—her confederate—suddenly appeared. I feared I had made a terrible mistake. I now realized that a liquor store was located next to Chili’s. I parked and loitered to look and see what would transpire. They walked into the Winn-Dixie grocery. I surreptitiously followed them. They bought some hamburger meat, buns, some vegetables, and milk. They paid with my $20 gift. I felt good.

And now as Dino and I were ordering from Jennifer at the Oconee Street Waffle House, he asked for a hamburger patty melt, extra cheese, and coke, and I wanted a ham-egg-and-cheese on wheat deluxe and non-sweet ice tea in a to-go cup.

Jennifer, the young, amiable waitress, knew us both by name and called him Dino and addressed me as Mr. Jim. I was flattered! I was the breakfast client and Dino the luncheon luncher. We had never met before at our common meeting place. He knew the waitresses and told me that super-sweet waitress Tracie, with long auburn hair hanging to her mid posterior, got demonstrably angry at him when he called her “fifty brushes,” a term I had never heard before.

I asked him a lot of questions. He seemed content to answer them all, even talking about personally unflattering things from his past, as well as some of his behaviors that were “a little bit more than the law will allow,” to quote a contemporary country song.

He worked for Mr. Bridge’s tree-trimming timber and lumber company for many years but gradually came to drink more and more beer and wine and then vodka, and then he became addicted to cocaine. Those problems cost him lots of jobs. At first, he could always get a new job but could not hold it very long. His employability steadily declined, and he lived on the streets off and on. Now he lived in an old run-down 36x8 mobile home on Ann Street, only a stone’s throw from the Waffle House where we were now eating. Three other men lived with him to share the rent. They all worked at odd jobs as best they could. They ate lunch when they could not afford the Waffle House at the “soup kitchen” at the nearby Methodist Church on Little Oconee Street. Dino volunteered that he had been “clean” from alcohol and drugs for six months now and was trying to get his life back together. He had lived for a short time in tent city, a place for homeless people.

During my questions and his full and forthcoming responses, his cell phone jingled. It was his girlfriend (fiancé) calling from Buckhead, Georgia, a tiny town between the larger Greensboro and Madison—not the Buckhead area in the northern part of the city of Atlanta. She was from Athens and also lives with him in the trailer most of the time, but now she had a job felling eight trees, cutting them up, and splitting them into firewood. The job paid $400, and she wanted it all and did not need Dino’s help.

I kept track of Dino Palazzola for many months, encountering him on occasion at the Waffle House, sometimes buying him a meal. One time at the high counter at the Waffle House, he confided to me that he was down to $10 and he was going to go up the street and get a hit. I guess he meant cocaine. I said, “Walk up to the Carmike movie theater [only a quarter of a mile] and take in a movie instead. It will take the cocaine off your mind. Meet me here tomorrow and tell me about the movie.”

He did. He seemed to trust me and sometimes even called me for advice. We were not really close friends, but not merely acquaintances either.

He once invited me his place where I met his fiancé, Mary McCommons. She explained they had met at the Bread of Life Church on the Lexington Road. She announced proudly, “Dino’s been clean now for almost nine months.”

The final episode in this story that I am about to reveal was only related at Dino and Mary’s Christmas Eve wedding and reception, to which I was invited, at the Cornerstone Church, also on Lexington Road. They both had full-time jobs, lived in a duplex on Cedar Shoals Road, not far from where I had first met Dino. Think how much that little $20 bill repaid me! I met Dino’s father at the reception. Mary, who knew computers, looked up Dino’s father on the Internet. They reestablished contact. Mr. Palazzola, now in his sixties, was delighted to tell me that he had just retired after many years as the financial CEO of Upjohn’s in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Having myself lived in Kalamazoo-zoo-zoo as a faculty member, I knew that Upjohn’s was a leading drug—I mean pharmaceutical—manufacturer. Mr. Palazzola also boasted, deservedly, that he has been alcohol-free for more than 30 years, thanks to AA. “Congratulations,” I said sincerely.

He then recounted to me what must have been a kind of AA insider joke that I did not think was all that funny. Here it goes: Bob was a traveling salesman and one day he found himself near a little town where he had grown up. He decided to pay an unexpected visit to see Don, his closest high-school buddy. He arrived at his house and rang the bell. Don’s wife answered. Bob asked, “Is Don home?” Don’s wife answered softly, “You haven’t heard? Don died of alcoholism, you know, cirrhosis of the liver last year. “Well,” Bob inquired in a strained voice, “Why didn’t he go to AA?” Don’s wife replied, “Well, he was never *that* bad.”

Now this Christmas 2007 even surpassed Dino’s eleventh-year-old best Christmas, with many more to come. Merry Christmas and happy holidays to Dino, Nancy, and Mr. Palazzola and to all of you.