

Street of Dreams

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We were all nineteen that summer – Mikey Calabrese, Vinny Manzone, Tony Two-Toes, Jr., named after his uncle, Tony Two-Toes, Sr. – don’t ask – and me, Joey Ippolito.

Nineteen was a great year for us as we lived our lives between the Christian Brothers from high school and the local wiseguys. We were from Jersey and better yet lived on the “shaw” – the New Jersey Seashore – and the horizons of our lives were as broad as the Atlantic before us. Vietnam was not in our consciousness nor was college. We could do anything we wanted. We decided to go to Vegas.

We were childishly arrogant to call Las Vegas “Vegas,” a place we never visited and about which we knew only two things – it wasn’t in Jersey and Sinatra owned it.

Sinatra – before Springsteen, before Bon Jovi, before Tony Soprano – there was and is Francis Albert Sinatra, the patron Saint of Jersey. His songs were the backgrounds of our teens and his image formed the dreams of our futures.

Mikey worked for his contractor-father as a day laborer. Tony Two-Toes, Jr. had a vague job at the track courtesy of Uncle Tony, Sr. who had an even vaguer job – again, don’t ask. Vinny was a grill man at the beach club where I worked.

I had the grueling job of cabana boy working seven days a week taking beach chairs out of lockers before sweeping them in the morning and putting the chairs back at night. For two hours of a work day, I earned \$25.00 a week plus tips, all of which came at the end of the summer when I carried home a pile of cash. The rest of the day I worked on my tan and flirted with all of those high school girls peeking around the corner toward womanhood.

We knew each other since kindergarten. It never dawned on me until lately that all of our names were kids’ names – Mikey, Vinny, Joey and Tony. Even today, Dr. Vincent Manzone is still Vinny, and Father Michael Calabrese is Mike. Only on the most solemn occasions, like a funeral Mass for one of the bosses, do we address him formally as Father Mike. Tony Two-Toes, Jr. is still Tony and is in the service of the state for another seven to ten. Those names – Mike, Tony, Joey, and Vinny, keep us in perpetual adolescence and those names are as comfortable as memories of Mama’s meatballs and spaghetti. I can’t think of anything but affection for those names and those times.

The Vegas plan started Labor Day night, the official end of summer after I had folded my last beach chair and collected my last tip, as we sat on the sand in the salt air, with six-packs of Rheingold cooling in the surf.

Today the Sopranos hit all too close to home and brings back those summer days because we knew every one of those guys. Tony, Jr. became one of them. The Jersey Shore wiseguys were one of those guys. Tony, Jr. became one of them. The Jersey

Shore wiseguys were more Donnie Brasco than Godfather; more mafia myth¹ than gangster romance and we lived in the light of that myth and had the swagger to prove it. After a summer of hard work with money in our pockets, we went west to win our fortune and meet Sinatra.

We left Jersey in typical Italian fashion. Each of our fathers and mothers took us to Newark Airport with a little envy in our fathers' eyes and stern warnings from our mothers.

“Don't gamble, don't go with strange girls.”

“But Ma,” with a wink to Dad.

Nevada is a hell of a lot further than we imagined and hell of a lot hotter than the Shore. We were on the casino floor before we were in our hotel rooms and the dealers were only too happy to oblige us. We knew enough to stay away from the slots and the roulette wheels. We had been playing dice and blackjack since our First Communion and those cowboys weren't going to take us.

Our first night, we had a good run of it at one of the \$5.00 tables. By good run, I mean playing for hours with watered down drinks. Within two days, we were tapped out. I looked at Vinny. Vinny looked at Mikey, Mikey looked at Tony, Tony looked at me. You would have thought we were in the original cast of Ocean's 11 as the dealer scooped up our last chips. We had made it just about as far as the door when the dealer said that she had just finished her shift and apologized for taking our money, but then again, as they say in Jersey, “Waddya gonna do?”

Annette was a Philadelphia girl with the warmest doe eyes I've ever been invited to look into. She overheard us talking about Sinatra who was at the Sands with his pals but we couldn't afford the show. Annette told us that she knew a place, a private club, where Sinatra went in the late hours and said that she could get us in if we were on our best behavior. Our best behavior meant that we not only had to look clean and presentable, but we couldn't talk to Sinatra. We readily agreed because we knew once Sinatra found out that we were from Jersey, we would be eating pasta at his place.

When I told Mikey, Vinny, and Tony about Sinatra, there was backslapping all around – the high fives hadn't been invented yet. We laundered and pressed our bet and whitest silk shirts with the longest collars we owned. Our grey sharkskin pegged pants were creased and our shoes sparkled like Sinatra's Mary Janes. I slipped on the sharpest pair of black leather ankle boots that cost me a good chunk of my last day's tips and off we went to meet Frank.

Annette gave us directions and a description of the Polo Club. There was no sign, just a door off an alley. We found the Club, said hello to the door guy from Annette, and walked in, four ice cool guys ready to hang out with Sinatra for the night. My God, this was better than being bat boy for the Yankees.

The Polo Club was nothing to speak of, but that night it was the classiest place in the world. The oak veneer bar with a faux leather arm bumper, matching stools, and thin brass foot rail occupied most of the room. The bar was lit, mirrored, and fairly stocked.

¹ Murray Kempton, *Rebellions, Perversities and Main Events* 225 (1994).

There were a few tables to one side and a pool table on the other and the music was decidedly Sinatra as he stood there with a couple of unattainable broads – tall, taut, and taken; two celebrity pals – both ball players; and, four stevedores in suits. His smile, which lit the night, was as piercing as his eyes. When he shot his cuffs through the arms of his tux jacket he defined style and he was bigger than life. We weren't a dozen feet from Sinatra & Co. – a dozen unabridgeable feet. Still, we were so close, the bar was so small, the night was so inviting, it was hard not to go up and say, "Hiya Frank, whatta ya drinkin'?" but we kept our vow of silence to Annette and moved to the pool table.

Vinny and Tony ordered 7&7's. Mikey ordered a Cutty and soda and I had Sinatra's drink – Jack on the rocks with a splash. It was hard not to look at Sinatra, a temptation we didn't resist. We kept quiet, we played pool, and knew we'd have a story to tell. We were well into the game and into another round of drinks and into the night at Frank's Club when one of the dockworkers grabbed my shoulder.

"Whaddya wearin'?"

"What?"

"Whaddya wearin'?"

"What? You don't like the shirt?"

"Nah."

"What's wrong with the pants then?"

"Nuthin'."

"What then?"

"The shoes, the little boots."

"What's wrong with 'em?"

"They ain't proper attire."

"What!?"

"Mr. Sinatra wants yous ta leave."

"Because of the boots?!"

"This way."

Grabbing my arm above the elbow, the dockworker escorted us to the door. Embarrassment was quickly washed away by anger and humiliation. The anger made me want to take a swing at the dockworker, at Sinatra, at whoever, but I knew if I had I wouldn't be writing this story. Humiliation washed over all the other emotions with a chest-heaving, heart-wracking feeling and all that pounding barely kept the tears out of my eyes and off my cheeks. I just about made it out the door before I had to pull my arm away and dab the corners of my eyes. Then we were in the alley.

"What did you do? What did you say to him? What have you done to us? What's going on?"

Questions swirled around us quicker than the ice melting in my Jack Daniels.

How quickly fortune disappears as we found ourselves on the street walking back to our hotel. We had gone a few blocks before somebody came up from behind. It was another one of the bodyguards from the Club. Mikey saw him first, but we all turned together, fists clenched, anger rising, when the bodyguard, John as I was later to learn, held up his hands.

“Fellas, take it easy. Sorry about what happened back there.”

He came over to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and said:

“Look, no hard feelings. Mr. Sinatra has a cold tonight.² He wanted me to give you this.”

“Cold, marrone!?” from at least two of us.

“Yeah, lookit, take this. Mr. Sinatra wants you to have it.”

With that, John stuffed three \$100 bills in my shirt pocket.

John and another one of the thugs had the assignment of walking around with Frank each with a fat wad of \$100 bills and when Frank said “Hit ‘em” they would slip the doorman, the waiter, the concierge, the dealer, whomever, a c-note.

On instinct, more than intelligence, I reached into the shirt pocket, took out the three bills and handed them back to John saying;

“No big deal. We didn’t mean any trouble.”

“Keep the money.”

“Nah. Have a good night. Seeya around.”

“Yea. Seeya around.”

Now, not only were we broke, we were busted. Our visions of gamblers’ glory and being members of the junior rat pack had evaporated because of Sinatra’s sniffles. We couldn’t take that story back to Jersey, but we could go back to the Strip before we left town.

I don’t remember if we ever made it to sleep that night, but I do remember that at flight time, we had worthy hangovers. Somewhere in the terminal I decided to stay. I had no pressing business back home and something was pulling me back to the Strip. Tony and Vinny thought I had lost my mind. Mikey just said “good luck.” With no plan, I said goodbye to my boys from Jersey, hit the wants ads, and called Annette. I felt that I owed her at least the story of our night at the Polo Club.

Annette was great about the whole thing. She laughed “Whaddya gonna do?!” Apparently, they say that in Philly too. We arranged to meet at a bar for locals only. Annette fixed me up with a job parking cars at the Sands. After a few months, I was head valet. The local bar became a favorite and I would run into dockworker John every now and then.

² Gay Talese, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” in *Frank Sinatra Reader* 99 (Steven Petkov & Leonard Mustazza eds. 1995).

John loved telling Frank stories and I loved hearing them. Stories of Frank winning a bundle at the Liston fight; Frank losing it back at Baccarat; Frank's loyalty and gifts; Frank and his latest babe.

John said that Frank could be a jerk sometimes, but was really a stand-up guy. I asked John about his likes and dislikes and really wanted to get to know the man, partly because of star envy and partly because I harbored a deep desire for a little taste of the sweet nectar of revenge. Frank liked people groomed and who dressed well, rather than necessarily well-dressed. Frank, John said, liked people, parties, and his solitude; liked drinks, not drunks; liked big shots and little guys. He hated golf and sunlight; loved his family life – and women. John also mentioned that Frank did not much care for the press. More than anything, he liked that old Italian thing – respect. I knew that if I ever met him I would give him what he wanted – clean, sharp, attentive, quiet, and very, very respectful.

John would tell me when Frank was at the Sands so that I could keep my eye out to see and maybe to meet him.

One night I jockeyed Sinatra's Caddy – a white on white convertible – up from the parking lot but never laid eyes on him. Still, one of his dockworkers "hit me" several times – twenty to be exact. Two grand for moving a cool ride 100 yards.

Shortly after that, I was made head valet, when John told me that Frank was back in town for a movie shoot and had a week at the Sands. This was my big chance to meet and talk to Frank Sinatra.

Every night for a week I starched, bleached, and starched again my white butler's coat. I polished, buffed, polished, and buffed again my black shoes and pressed my pants with a razor's crease, waiting for Sinatra to notice me.

One night there he was, I could feel it and my face flushed. Standing right next to him I barely noticed his capped teeth and his hairpiece. He was shorter and slighter than I imagined but you could feel him there and I felt a part of the great ring-a-ding-ding that was Sinatra in Vegas. Oh and yes he was still bigger than life. He looked at me and asked me to get his car.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Sinatra." After I uttered my first words to him, my mind froze, my tongue followed suit and I stood still. No doubt Sinatra had seen this effect before as he smiled and said:

"Hey kid," even though "Joey" was stitched on my jacket I was still "kid." "The car?"

I was gone like a shot and he was smiling and talking when I handed the keys to his driver. Then he said: "Kid, what's the largest tip you ever got?" as he handed me a wad.

"Two thousand." I said.

Without blinking, "What high roller gave you that?"

With that question, my shoulders went back, I stood a little taller, I became part of his night, his town, and I was able to look straight into those not-so-ol' blue eyes, and say the last words I would ever say to Sinatra:

“You did, Frank.”³

Sinatra's tip? Four thousand dollars.

For that score, I could go back to Jersey. I had a little taste of the nectar I dreamed of as I heard the Man sing to the tune of, for me, six large:

“Dreams, broken in two

Will me made like new

On the Street of Dreams”⁴

I never did thank Sinatra for all of that money he gave me over 40 years ago. I should have, Annette still loves that diamond.

³ Bill Zehme, *The Way You Wear Your Hat: Frank Sinatra and the Lost Art of Livin'* (1999).

⁴ *Street of Dreams* (Sam M. Hill & Victor Young)