



At almost six-feet he was tall compared to his Italian-American contemporaries. Before the years and severe arthritis made him stooped and stiff, he must have been even taller.

His name was Alexander, or, to be more accurate, Alessandro Pignone. To most he was Alex or Duke, but to me he was Alexander the Great or Zio Alessandro. The name Duke was a rather sneering reference to the fact that for much of his life he did not work at a regular job. Most people did not know that, as child of three or four in Italy, he fell down a steep hill into a ravine and almost lost his life. He was hospitalized for nearly two months and when he returned to his family it was clear that he had suffered some brain damage that left him with significant but invisible disabilities. It was a subject that was never discussed. He had all his limbs. He could walk, he could see, he could talk. People would ask, "What the heck is wrong with him?" Some declared that he was just lazy, but nothing could be further from the truth.

What they didn't know is that he did tons of work around the house. He cleaned the snow, not only in the front yard, but in the backyard too. He trimmed the grapevines and watered the tomato and pepper plants that grew in the family garden that his brother Carmine planted. He was such a good guy he also cleaned the snow off the cars parked on the streets after a snowfall,

even if he didn't know the owners. He shoveled snow for the neighbors and would never take a penny for doing it. Alex always opened doors for worshipers on Sunday morning at St. Anthony's and later at Holy Cross. No, Alex was not lazy but he was uniquely content with his life, with who he was and where he was.

At the time of his accident he had been left in the care of his fifteen-year-old brother Carmine, who always felt a special responsibility for Alex for not watching him more closely. He became Alex's guardian and protector until the day he died. That brother was my grandfather and thus Zio Alessandro came into my life.

Alexander sightings were common, not only in all parts of Buffalo, but throughout Erie County and even beyond. He was well known by the local police who walked the beats of Buffalo and its environs. We kids thought he must have worn out more shoes than any other single person in the history of the world. He walked everywhere: from Buffalo to North Collins, the East Side, the West Side, north and south. He walked everywhere yet nowhere in particular much of the time. Alessandro's family had a mixed breed dog named Princey who was his best friend and together they often walked the town for hours. We often wondered how sometimes Alex found his way home, but he always did. He walked not only in spring and summer, but also in the fall and winter, in the rain, wind, sun and snow. As he got older he often wore threadbare clothing on his walks. Although his family bought him new clothes, he refused to wear the new until he had absolutely no other choice because his old clothes were simply falling apart. To many, he looked like a tramp, a bum.

The Duke was kind and considerate to all and he seemed to be gloriously unaware of the disdain of some of the people he met. His illness had made him into someone special, a rare breed, childlike and innocent, like no other any of us have ever met before or since. He lived in the moment. He seemed to have no cares or

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worries, simply taking life as it came, the good and the bad. You couldn't get him to go see a doctor or visit a hospital for love or money. He would never let you take his photograph. To him, life was what it was, and whenever the Lord would choose to call him home, he would be ready. Children and animals knew that he was rare and special, even if adults weren't perceptive enough. Alex was like a piper. Often when he walked he would do so with an honor guard of children, dogs and even a stray cat or two following behind. It was a sight to behold.

A little boy, Salvatore, who suffered from asthma wanted desperately to join his Uncle Alex, Zio Alessandro, on one of those walks, but was not allowed to do so for fear that he would have an asthma attack brought on by the exertion of the walk. The boy kept pestering his uncle until he could no longer refuse. Alexander told Salvatore that it would have to be a short and sweet journey and then only if the weather cooperated. The two got going about 6:30 one morning, when the youngster was left in Alex's care. It started out as an uneventful but exciting interlude. The two proceeded on a route up Seventh Street to Connecticut Street, past the 174th Armory, and then over Richmond Avenue to Barker to Delaware and then up Delaware to Forest Lawn Cemetery where they stopped at the Red Jacket statue for lunch. Alexander pulled out a brown paper bag containing a pepper and egg sandwich and an orange for the two to share, but suddenly the little boy began to wheeze and he soon was having a full-blown bronchial asthma attack. Alexander was frightened, but took the six year old boy into his arms and walked home, carrying him the entire way.

After a while, the boy began breathing better, he thanked his benefactor for one of the best days of his life and asked to be put down as they approached School #3 on Porter and Niagara Streets. They walked the rest of the way hand-in-hand and no one was ever the wiser. Neither of them ever mentioned this event, though Salvatore would remember it in the years to come as a near disaster that turned out to be a great success. It was his first great adventure. And, for both,

it only enhanced the love they felt for one another. Did I mention that Princey was also with them and he too kept their secret.

When Alex died on December 30, 1956, he was sitting on the back stairs with a shovel in his hand. He had been removing snow. He had a look on his face that his grandnephew, Salvatore, who found him and closed his beautiful and innocent blue eyes for the last time, never forgot. At that moment, the then 16-year-old felt the loss of a beloved companion and the pain of death for the very first time. He had never felt that way before. The boy and Princey tried to comfort one another. Salvatore knew, however, that he now had a guardian angel, a sweet saint who would protect and watch over him just as he had on their great adventure. He mouthed the words "Goodbye Alessandro" as he left the old man to tell the other family members what had just happened. Princey stayed by Alessandro's side, faithful to the end.

Zio Alessandro – thank you for being there for me.
I love you now and forever.



Six-year old Sal Martoche
Accompanied his Uncle Alessandro
on one of his daily walks.