

A Thug in the Making

By Kenneth Janssen

Assault with a deadly weapon, grand theft auto, importuning, trafficking in illegal drugs, these were only some of the illegal activities that Marco Vennuti was involved in. What Marco's rap sheet didn't show is that his persona as a "tough guy" did not have a natural origin. His biological father was a gentle man; an insurance company accountant until his untimely death in a car accident when Marco was only nine years old. To assure that there was food on the table and a roof over their heads, his mother married a family friend, Guido DeAngelo within a year. It was a marriage not of love, but of convenience .

At the age of eleven Marco began coming home battered and bruised from street fights with neighborhood kids. That was the final straw for his step-father. DeAngelo was determined that there would be no sissy-boy living under his roof. Over the objections of his mother, who wanted her son to be "soft and gentle" like his grandfather Antonio D'Annunzio, a published poet of some repute in the old country, Guido began planning how he could "toughen-up" this frail child. One day, when Marco returned home, after still another beating, Guido decided that the time had arrived to start the boy's "training". His wife would be gone for several hours so he would not be interrupted. He took Marco down to the cellar.

"You pathetic little shit," he began, "I'm going to toughen you up. It's for your own good." He proceeded to give Marco a methodical beating including numerous punches to his face and body, kicks to his head and ribs and knocking him into all four walls of the basement. Marco begged him to stop but his pleas were ignored. When Guido was finished he left the boy unconscious on the cellar floor while he went upstairs for a beer and to catch a little of the Indians game on TV. Twenty minutes later, when he returned to the basement, he found a frightened Marco sitting up against a wall, whimpering. An angry Guido walked over to Marco, grabbed him by the shoulders and screamed at him, "You little wimp, if you don't stop that crying right now, we'll do it all over again." The crying ceased immediately. "Boy, if you're going to learn one thing today, it's that this is the very last time anyone will ever get the best of you. I'm going to teach you how to take care of yourself. You're going to learn to take out anyone who tries to lay a hand on you. I can't do that for you, you've got to want that for yourself." Guido saw a glimmer of interest through the swollen lids. "Do you understand what I'm tryin' to do for you?"

The little head bobbed up and down. Marco was face-to-face with his step- father. He looked into Guido's eyes, and at that moment, through the fear and intense pain, he suddenly realized that DeAngelo was trying to help him; that he really cared about his well being.

Later that afternoon, when his mother returned, she broke into uncontrollable sobs at the sight of Marco. She knew better than to confront her husband over what he had done. Instead, she suffered in silence. Over time she would grow to appreciate the training that Guido gave Marco, although Marco's

soft side that she had been nurturing for years would rapidly disappear. Her new concern was that Marco, with his new-found strength, might become the neighborhood bully.

Over his mother's objection, Guido kept the boy home from school for the next two weeks. It was a credit to his skill that his punches and kicks were so carefully placed that no bones had been broken. It would take time for the scratches to heal and the bruises to fade. As Marco recovered his resolve never to lose another fight grew stronger. He learned the fine art of fighting, both fair and dirty. Guido was an excellent teacher. He had learned to handle himself on the streets of Dayton, Ohio.

When Marco eventually returned to school it only took two street brawls for him to establish respect; a respect that was well earned. The boys he fought required extensive medical attention. At the age of eleven, Marco suddenly had the reputation of someone you didn't want to mess with. Boys, often several years older than he, had the good sense to stay clear of him, sometimes crossing the street to avoid any possibility of contact. This amused Marco because he wasn't looking for fights. In fact he mostly went out of his way to avoid them. What everyone thought they saw when they confronted him, that he was a bully waiting to beat up on the next unsuspecting victim, was far from the truth. If you didn't bother him, usually you had nothing to fear from Marco. All that changed on Marco's eighteenth birthday. His step-father Guido was in poor health and his mother had long since turned Marco's soul over to God; her parenting now reduced to novenas and masses said on his behalf. The streets were ripe with opportunity for the young thug with Marco's talents. Within three months he had a thriving drug business going and was partnered with a tri-state syndicate.

Marco Vennuti became yet another example of the streets reproducing the basic ingredients for crime and corruption in our inner cities.

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