

*Old Italian Neighborhood Values*

then, no hair dryers in barbershops either in those days, which meant that he had to go to a lady hairdresser shop to get his hot air. What made the situation more unacceptable was his prettiness; it exemplified weakness. He was a little bit too feminine looking. One night, he was dancing with one of the most coveted sensual girls in the neighborhood. I remember it well. One of the old neighborhood bullies was the Goat. He was respected and feared for his ability to level an opponent with either a left hook or a right cross, and he frequently did so. He used the surprise, or cold-cocking, technique. In other words, his opponent never saw his fist coming. While Gino was dancing with the pretty girl, the Goat walked over, pushed him away, and slapped him in the face. The Goat wanted the girl for himself. Total silence fell upon the dance hall.

Mo walked over and admonished him. “Hey Goat, why did you slap Gino in the face? What did he do to you? It’s not very nice, you know. I think you should apologize.”

The silence now became more silent. The Goat did not apologize. You just didn’t apologize in the old neighborhood. If you did, you lost your claim to masculinity—for life. The Goat walked away to the other side of the dance floor.

In the old neighborhood, that meant Mo won the battle.

Next is Spinuzzi, or John Esposito, a physician who specializes in clinical research with new medicines. He was unique in the old neighborhood because he had high visibility but no enemies. His immigrant father was a self-educated man who gave his son weekly

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instruction in everything from history to vocabulary. Spinuzzi always maintained that the greatest lesson he learned from all his father's lessons was Aristotle's advice to "Observe, observe, and observe." And so he did. One of his interesting observations dealt with lipstick. Lipstick was just beginning to come into vogue in the old neighborhood and Spinuzzi didn't like it. He observed that lipstick worn by women while they were eating disappeared from their lips and was carried by the food into their digestive system. He told us that if the trend continued, massive lipstick poisoning of women would soon occur. To this day, no one has looked into this possibility.

Spinuzzi remained aloof from controversy but on rare occasions changed his colors and became a full-blown participant. It first happened when he was about twelve years old at the Saturday matinee. The movie theater was the only place in the old neighborhood where the boys could get physically close to the girls. Most of the girls were entering puberty and were beginning to blossom, wearing tight sweaters to show off nature's wonders (though not as tight as today, I might add). Spinuzzi, along with the other guys, needed no lesson about girls from Aristotle. They observed and observed and observed. Some boys, perhaps two or three out of two hundred, were fortunate enough to have the gals sit on their laps during most of the movie, then they could then fantasize about a real sexual experience while they jerked off. Every one else had to manufacture their fantasies from scratch.

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This particular afternoon, he arrived a little late for the matinee. He usually sought the end seat because he had a slight touch of sitting-in-the-middle-of-the-row phobia. But all the aisle seats were taken, and he had no choice but to sit in mid-row. To compound the problem, he sat next to the Snake.

Though Spinuzzi had no great respect for the Snake, he was well aware that he was the leader of the “Snake Gang.” Though it only ranked about fourth or fifth in power and prestige, it was still a force to be reckoned with. Next to the Snake sat a truly attractive young lass, the type that would send Keats into poetic ecstasy. She was, however, not the type of innocent gal portrayed in “The Eve of St. Agnes.” Her innocent face belied the fact that all her clothes were intentionally very tight, a rare sight in those days, maximizing her credentials.

The Snake never read Aristotle. Instead of observing her and enjoying her beauty, he grabbed her like Attila the Hun and tried to seduce her—more or less because the real thing was almost impossible in the old neighborhood—midway through a Roy Rogers film.

As he was trying to hump her, she made imploring eye contact and shouted, “Spinuzzi, Spinuzzi, help me!”

Observing no more, Spinuzzi spun the Snake around and cold-cocked him with a firm left hook, right on the center of the Snake’s nose. Rivers of blood began to flow from both nostrils. Observing this, and observing that the members of the Snake Gang were also observing, he left the movie on the run.

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He waited for at least a month in anxious anticipation of revenge from the Snake Gang. It didn't happen. He subsequently learned that the girl was a first class tease and wasn't worth saving. A teaser was rated much lower than a whore by our code. According to old neighborhood values, therefore, the Snake was right and Spinuzzi was wrong.

So on to Pignachi, or Dante Marrone: He was one of the first to move out of the neighborhood. He was also one of the few that didn't go to Catholic school. His father never told him why he sent him to public school. Paradoxically, he was nominated by the guys as the most Catholic person in the neighborhood.

Pignachi was selfless and went out of his way to help people. He rarely spoke of himself. Some of the guys believed he never even thought of himself, which, I knew, was impossible. Sometimes his even temper and gentle smile really annoyed the boys. He seemed to be a phony and, in the old neighborhood, phonies were treated with disdain. What really puzzled the boys was his lack of interest in girls. Some thought he was a *finocchio*, a Roman term for a homosexual male.

After he left the neighborhood, something unexpected happened. We know this to be true because Pignachi's mother told Spinuzzi's mother the whole story. After he graduated from high school, he went to a secular college where he met and fell in love with a sensuous Jewish female student. In the beginning they were both happy and enjoyed the classic chaste relationship, which was common

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in the days before the advent of oral contraceptives. There were, however, certain problems, which were big in those days. Her parents wanted her to marry a Jew. His parents were a little bit more flexible and would not stand in the way. Frankly speaking, Pignachi's mother told Spinuzzi's mother that they'd been afraid he would never marry and were tickled pink that he finally found a woman. In those days, Jews, according to old Jewish neighborhood values, were not permitted to date, let alone marry Gentiles. *Goyim* were often not even permitted in the house. For that reason, she asked Pignachi to change his name to Dante Goldberg before he met her parents. And so he did. They both worked hard to create a Jewish history for Pignachi in order to fool her parents and make things work more smoothly. Surprisingly enough, things went well until their biologic heaters started to accelerate.

She was extremely hot-natured and a teaser, and he was beginning to learn what real sexual heat meant. They would spend passionate hours alone and talk about some of their heretofore hidden sexual propensities and other secrets. In those days Jewish people, particularly women, rarely drank much. She was an exception. She loved the stuff and taught him to love it, too. And with this change came the breakdown of barriers to passionate expression.

They were fast approaching the moment of sexual consummation. He wanted to wait until they were married. He had made a decision, like the Mayans once did, to masturbate a lot to relieve the sexual pressure until they were married. The Mayans also encouraged premarital male homosexuality to relieve the sexual pressure of male

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youths until they married, and to maintain the virginity of the female, which was highly valued.

Dante wanted to suggest that she also masturbate until they were married but, for some reason, he was afraid to ask. It was not the thing to do in the old neighborhood. It bordered on masculine heresy. On the other hand, a gal like this, in my opinion, needed no advice on masturbation. She probably was way ahead of Pignachi.

Disturbed by his behavior, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She rented a room at a cheap hotel (there were no motels in those days) and planned to get him drunk. Cocaine, marijuana, Quaaludes and Ecstasy were not available in those days. He did get drunk, however, and she did entice him to the hotel room. They both undressed and then passionately embraced. And then it happened! He suddenly leaped out of bed and stood before her with his erection in place. He whispered, "I'm leaving. It simply won't work. Only if we marry can I do it. You probably don't understand this, but that is the way I am. Will you marry me?"

She hesitated and then forthrightly said, "No, our worlds are too far apart." By the way she said what she said, he knew that this was her final decision. There's nothing, at least there wasn't in those days, as powerful as tradition.

He put on his clothes and softly said goodbye. They never dated again.

He went on to become a parish priest.