



“A Dying Breed (Photo: Big Stock Photo)

**I liked Tony. Which is to say, he never
gave me a reason *not* to like him.**

A Dying Breed

Theodore Jerome Cohen

I liked Tony. Which is to say, he never gave me a reason *not* to like him. We were gym acquaintances. You know, the type of person you usually see when you're both working out. First, you nod to them; then, after a while, you exchange a few words; and perhaps, on a weekend, when time isn't a concern, you take a few minutes to chat about the weather or some sports event. But Tony's and my relationship never got beyond the "exchange a few words" stage, and at that, only on his entering the gym.

Which he did sorta like a bulldog heading out the door to "do his duty." Hunched over—perhaps because he was laboring under the weight of his three heavy-looking gold chains—this stocky bald man, who I estimated to be in his late 40s, hit the floor on every visit with his jaw clenched and his eyes steeled forward as he made fast for the bank of treadmills that stood to the back of the gym. Most of all, it was the bulky long-sleeved workout shirts and gray sweatpants he wore that always seemed more than a little strange to me, given how most of the gym's patrons were dressed in T-shirts and shorts.

Still, he appeared to be friendly enough. "How're ya doin', kid?" he would grunt as he passed me if I were on a machine near the door. *Kid!* He was easily 25 years younger.

"Good, Tony, good. 'N' you!"

"I'm good, too," he'd mutter over his shoulder without stopping, wiping his nose on his left sleeve. "I'm good."

The stench of cigar smoke that clung to his clothes followed him like a cheap perfume. Within a minute I watched as several women, who seconds earlier had been using machines near the one Tony selected, dismounted and moved farther down the row to escape the odor of spent tobacco now permeating the air in that area.

He was, in a word, unique. But then, aren't we all?

That gym, like gyms everywhere, had its fair share of *unique*—which is to say, *interesting*—people. These included an undertaker; a man we called "the Godfather," who ran a large trash hauling company; some law enforcement officers from the FBI and various local and state municipalities; the coroner for a nearby county (a woman, by the way, who frequently invited me to observe autopsies in her morgue . . . offers for which I always took a raincheck); and the like—a most heterogeneous group of men and women, indeed.

You name it, there probably were at least several from among the hundred or so people in the gym at any given time whose jobs or backgrounds would have surprised you.

But Tony was an enigma, to say the least. He used only the treadmill, and then, for exactly thirty minutes, before storming out of the building. And with the exception of a man named Luca—a professional bodybuilder who frequented the gym every morning, weekends included—he never said more than a few words to anyone.

I knew Luca; liked him, too. He was kind enough, some years ago, to give me pointers on the proper use of an *abdominal machine*. We happened to have been working out next to each other when he turned and suggested how I might make some changes to enhance my workout. It wasn't long before we became good friends, stopping frequently to talk about his workout, his diet, and the bodybuilding contests he entered.

"What's Tony's story?" I asked him one day as we worked out next to one another on leg-strengthening machines. Luca was using the leg press.

Luca pursed his lips and shook his head. "Do you really want to know?" he chuckled.

“Well, now you put it that way, I’m not so sure.”

Luca extended his legs, bringing up 250 pounds from the floor. “I went to high school with Tony, ya know. It was back in 1985—St. Michael’s, in Philadelphia.” He allowed the weight to return to within a few inches of the floor before again flexing his legs.

“Tony—his real name is Anthony Rico—was a good kid. He played baseball like you wouldn’t believe. I thought he could’ve gone on to play Triple-A ball, and I wasn’t the only one. He played third base most of the time . . . hit .601 in his senior year. And move! Boy howdy, could that man hustle! Ran the 100-yard dash in under 12 seconds.” Luca slowly let the weights descend to the floor.

“So what happened to him?” I asked, taking my seat at the machine Luca had been using and reducing the weight by 100 pounds.

“What always happens?” Luca responded rhetorically, licking the thumb and forefinger on his right hand before smoothing his mustache. “He got into trouble, first with a girl—Ann Marie Benvenuti was her name, as I recall. We never did know where her parents sent her to have the baby—probably a convent somewhere in upstate New York. At least that was the rumor. Meanwhile, Tony started to do drugs, and it didn’t take long before his father threw him out of the house. He never finished high school, either. The last I saw of him then, he already was working for the mob. God only knew where he was living.”

“Couldn’t have been easy,” I commented, my words coming in spurts as I concentrated on my breathing, “especially being on your own at that age.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t,” remarked Luca, wiping his sweat with the towel slung around his neck, “but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to see where his life was headed.”

“Whaddya mean?” I asked, relinquishing the leg press to Luca, who immediately set the weight to 260 pounds.

“From what I read in the papers, a few days after he turned 21 he blew away some 17-year-old kid in south Philly, right between the eyes. Kapow!” he said, illustrating the fatal shot by pointing and pretending to fire a “finger gun” above the bridge of his own nose.

“Police said it was probably a drug deal gone bad. He must’ve had a good lawyer because he only served five years on a manslaughter plea. But after he was released, he was in and out of jail all the time on various charges, usually parole violations related to the possession of guns and other weapons the police would find on him or in his apartment. His coke habit didn’t help, either.”

“Why would he let himself be caught carrying a gun if he was on parole and knew the police would be looking for any excuse to bring him in?”

Luca let the weights down, turned, and stared at me with “that” look . . . you know, the one with the eyebrows raised and the head cocked to one side . . . the one you get when you ask a *really* dumb question. Then, he turned and thrust his legs to their full extension.

“For the same reason he wears a bullet-proof vest under his long-sleeve shirt in the gym! Because someone—probably *more* than one—wants him dead. And I need not mention the members of that 17-year-old kid’s family, do I?”

“Even after all these years?”

“Come on . . . these people *never* forget. Ever!”

I was about to say something, but Luca had already moved to another machine—still in earshot, however. “Course, he could also have been the target of the De Caprio Family and its friends. Lots of people thought it was Tony who murdered Marco “Mad Dog” De Caprio in a mob hit in Trenton back in 2010. Honest to God! That

killing really pissed off the police, not just because they haven't solved the case yet, but also because De Caprio was reputed to have been a police informant at the time."

Jesus! I thought. *I could be exchanging pleasantries with Tony some morning on his way to the treadmills and in the next second, someone could come up behind him and pump a few rounds into the back of his head. Wouldn't that be a great way to start the day?!*

Luca started to chuckle. "Knowing Tony, I'll bet if we searched his car right now, we'd find some coke, a bag of crack, including the necessary paraphernalia, a few revolvers, and at least one .380 semi-automatic handgun. Oh, and let's not forget a few bottles of Jack Daniels and some prescription drugs." He winked. "A guy has his needs, dontcha know?"

My mind reeled.



It had been a couple of weeks since I'd last been to the gym, business having taken me from the city. An early morning workout saw many familiar faces on the machines around me, including Luca's, who was busy warming up with some stomach crunches. I scanned the stair-steppers and treadmills for signs of Tony, but saw none.

"Welcome back," said Luca, smiling broadly when he saw me. "We missed you. When you're not here, there's no one around to 'punish,' " he added, laughingly.

"It's good to have friends," I deadpanned. "I mean, without me, who could you beat up on?"

I sat on one of the leg-strengthening machines "By the way, I don't see Tony. Is he here this morning?"

Luca's demeanor turned somber. "We buried him last week. I thought maybe you'd heard."

"Heard what?" I asked, taken aback. "I saw him here just before I left town . . . he stormed in right past me, head down, jaw clenched, gold chains swinging, hell-bent for the treadmills! What happened?"

"The police are still trying to sort it out. What we know is, he was gunned down last week going into his apartment building by a person or persons unknown—probably over drugs, if I had to guess. But who knows? The guy had a lot of enemies, that's for sure."

"Wow! I musta seen him on one of his last visits to the gym. Good thing they didn't 'take 'im out' here! So, what happens now?"

"It all depends on how fast the police solve the crime. If it was a drug deal gone bad, that's one thing. But some around here think Tony was a made man. And if that's the case, and if his death was in retribution for De Caprio's murder back in 2010, then all hell's gonna break loose."

While I took that in, Luca changed the subject abruptly. "Emphasize your quadriceps!" he admonished. "Lower your feet slightly."

I stopped, readjusted the position of my feet, and continued working my quads.

We never spoke about Tony again.