

The Cow in the Doorway

By Gino B. Bardi

Chapter 1

My father's finger rapped the letter in front of me, right above the drawing of a clock tower and the words *Cornell University*. "Sign it. Tony. What are you waiting for? For God's sake, *you were held back in first grade!* Now they want to give you a seat in the Class of 1972! At an *Ivy League school!* What's to think about?"

He reminded me at least once a week that I had to repeat first frigging grade. I guess that's something you never outgrow. I knew that arguing with Lou—everyone but me called him Lou—was a waste of time. He only called me Tony when he was getting pissed off. If things were good, I was 'son' or even 'Sarge.' I guess he missed the army. When he inspected my room every Saturday morning I had to snap to attention and salute. That was fun, when I was eight. But not at nineteen! My mom usually sided with me. But she always caved as soon as she felt my dad's steel resolve.

Cornell was about the last place I wanted to go, for several reasons. Each one, all by itself, would be enough to set him off. So I lied to him.

"But, Dad, Cornell is so expensive." This was Tony-speak for "I'll have to work too hard."

"I'll find the money," he said, which, of course, meant, "You'll get a job."

"It's so far away."

"It's closer than Plattsburgh. You were all set to go there. What's the difference?"

"Plattsburgh has a great English department," I replied, which we both understood to mean "Plattsburgh is easy."

"The only reason why you like Plattsburgh is because it's the biggest party school in New York State. Forget it. Why the hell do you want to be an English major, anyway? How can you make a living with a degree in English? Or do you think you're going to support yourself playing poker?" I gave my mom the puppy dog's eyes.

"What about Kurt Vonnegut, Lou? I think he's doing pretty well for himself. He went to Cornell."

I nodded. As if I had another "Cat's Cradle" welling up within me, ready to burst out on the page. Maybe not... "Also," I said, "you can make a lot of money playing poker."

"Yeah, maybe," said my dad. "But you're a terrible poker player, Tony. Even your mother can beat you."

What? I turned to look at my mom. She looked down at the table. "That's true," she said quietly. "I always let you win."

My dad changed the subject. "One thing is for sure: Cornell has the most beautiful campus in the state. Maybe the whole country."

No argument there. I had toured seven colleges. I had been to Ithaca. I had seen the famous clock tower, heard the chimes, hiked the trails through the gorges. I had walked the suspension bridge high over a rushing waterfall. I had sampled coffee with cinnamon and whipped cream in

dark coffee houses where aspiring poets wailed and moaned. It was, absolutely, the best school I had seen. But...

“Is it the girls?” asked my dad. “You weren’t impressed, were you? Yeah, I saw them too. They all look like they spend every night studying and eating donuts, right?”

“The place is, like, three quarters guys.”

“That’s because a girl needs to be twice as smart as a boy to get into that school,” said my mom. “But that’s changing. By the time you graduate, there will be more girls than boys. You watch.”

By the time I graduate? That’s the problem right there. What if I didn’t? I had one card left to play. *The truth* was always a dangerous, last chance move.

“What if I can’t do the work?” The fear in my voice was genuine. “What if I flunk out? I’ll get drafted in a heartbeat. Did you see the casualties in Vietnam now? They’ll send me home in a box, Dad. Don’t you think maybe an easier school would be—”

“What’s the matter, crybaby? Afraid of a challenge? Afraid of being left back again? That’s the best reason in the world to go to a tough college. Maybe you’ll knuckle down and work for once in your life. Maybe you’ll get some ambition and learn to stand up for yourself. Maybe you’ll grow some *cogliones*. Some balls.”

“I know what *cogliones* are, Dad.”

“Well, you could do with a pair, son. I’m just saying.”

He called me “son.” That meant that as far as he was concerned the discussion was closed. I had lost.

My mom tried to make me feel better. “They wouldn’t have accepted you if they thought you couldn’t do the work, Tony.” She almost sounded like she meant it. “Don’t worry so much. You’ll be fine. And if you do meet a girl, at least she’ll be smart! Maybe she’ll help you with your French homework!”

My old man tapped the paper again. “Sign it. Get on with your life.”

“You’ll be fine, Tony,” my mom said again.

That made three times. Who was she trying to convince?

* * *

It seemed like forever before I got my room assignment. In the intervening weeks I was introduced by my parents to everyone—friends, family and complete strangers—as “Our son, the Cornellian,” as if I wore a cap and gown and clutched a rolled-up diploma. “I got in,” I said under my breath. “I haven’t gotten out.” No matter. There was no turning back. It didn’t matter what I wanted. Hell, it was only my life. Why should I get a vote?

I sat down at the kitchen table and dumped the envelope from the Housing Department. My roommate’s name was Clarence Carter, from South Michigan Avenue in Chicago. “Unfortunately,” the letter said, “because of an unusually large incoming class, you will be sharing a small single in one of the university’s historic buildings. Space will be extremely limited.”

My father dug into the letter as soon as he returned that evening. His face told me that something had gone horribly wrong. His eyebrows rose as he read the letter aloud. “South Michigan Avenue, Chicago? He’s a ghetto—” He stopped abruptly.

“Lou!” My mother jumped all over him. I thought she might smack him. It would have been a big first for her. I had no idea what this was about.

“What’s wrong with South Michigan Avenue?” I asked. How could my father know anything about anybody who lived in Chicago? We lived on Long Island, a thousand miles away.

“That street is the toughest part of town. It’s the ghetto. One big slum. The kids there are all in gangs. Your roommate is going to be a tough black kid.” And I was a very untough, short white kid. I got that...Clang! I was out of my corner. Round two had started.

“You don’t know that. Anyway, so what?” I sounded defiant, arrogant, even passionate about something I had barely thought about. “Why should a white kid from Long Island get to go to a good school but not a black kid from Chicago?”

“Think, Tony.” His expression suggested that if he didn’t tell me to think, I would simply forget to do it. “He’s a ghetto kid. Don’t you get it? An angry kid with a chip on his shoulder, with something to prove.” My father leaned into it, his breath coming hard, surprising the hell out of me. I had always thought his occasional racist comments were just a product of his upbringing, his military service, his boyhood on the streets of Manhattan. He had always been careful about that stuff around my sister and me.

“I thought you had to be smart to get into that school,” I said in my best snot-nosed way. “Don’t smart black kids deserve to go to college?”

His face turned red. I must have said something stupid. “You don’t get it. The goddamned government is making the colleges accept minorities. They call it ‘affirmative action.’ They accept any dumb-ass if his skin is dark while the white kids like you have to work their butt off to get in. Who do you think pays for that?”

“But,” I began, with no idea what to say next.

“The hell with that. You’re going to ask for a different roommate.”

“I’m the guy who’s going to college, Dad, not you. I get a say in this. I’ll take what they give me. I haven’t even met him yet. I’m not starting college already hating people I don’t know.” I sounded pompous and arrogant. Where did this come from all of a sudden? My usual strategy was to choose whichever path had the fewest obstacles. I had a real talent for sliding through my life the easiest way possible. Was I going to make a stand for this, for a kid I had never met, in a place I didn’t want to be? “You sound like a racist, Dad.”

He answered me slowly. “I am not a racist. Don’t be such a naïve idiot. This is your *life* we’re talking about.”

“You’re right. It *is* my life. I’ll make my own decisions. *If you don’t mind.*”

“Fine. Have it your way. But don’t come crawling to me when you see what a goddamned mistake you just made.”

I looked at my mother. She would support me, she would agree that this was the only choice. But she looked away. I realized I had no idea what I was in for. What kind of hell was South Michigan Avenue, Chicago?

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It was mid-September when my dad loaded my small pile of luggage into the station wagon. My precious twelve-string guitar and my 1938 Underwood typewriter—tools of the trade for an English major and aspiring folksinger—were piled in the back along with a box of school supplies that my mom had bought for, apparently, a seventh grader. Inside a wooden cigar box secured with rubber bands were four decks of cards and two stacks each of red, blue, and black poker chips. All my clothes fit easily in my dad’s green duffel bag stenciled *Louis Vitelli, U.S. Army*. I sat quietly in the back seat, thinking—without even being told to—about what waited for

me at the end of the five hour drive from the south shore of Long Island to the middle of upstate New York.

I wasn't worried. Who calls their kid "Clarence" anyway? I had never met a kid with that name. I hoped he had an edgy-sounding nickname, like Spike or Rico. I just couldn't imagine me ever saying something like, "This is my bro, Clarence."

"What are you giggling at?" asked my mom as Lou pointed the wagon north on Highway 17.

"Nothing," I said as I smiled at the image in my mind of some guy named Clarence Carter. He would probably be a bookworm or a nerd, with thick glasses that made his eyes look like blurry marbles, his hair in cornrows, and maybe even braces on his teeth.

