

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?

* * *

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.

Chapter 2

Clarence Carter, my new roommate, had already moved in and unpacked by the time we arrived. The bottom bunk, the large desk, and the unbroken chair had been claimed as clearly as if he had planted a flag. The tiny room was barely ten feet on a side, stuffed with a bunk bed and two desks and dressers. The bare floor was cold stone terrazzo, the walls were ancient plaster the color of old newspaper. A single window let in a pale light through glass too high to be washed by anything other than the bleak Ithaca weather.

Clarence didn't make an appearance until after my parents had left. The Clarence of my imagination—the guy with the thick glasses and the cornrows—it wasn't him.

He didn't look anything like that. Compared to me, Clarence was a giant, well over six feet tall, slender and wiry. His skin was black, not brown, and his hair was a dense mat, closely cropped, just long enough to support the thick plastic comb that stuck out of the back like the feather on an Indian brave. The only similarity between Clarence Carter and my imaginary Clarence was the glasses. His had black frames that made him look like a journalist or an angry scholar. He was organized, meticulous and disciplined.

He was also completely terrifying.

“Hi, Clarence,” I said. “I'm Tony.”

“Pleased to meet you,” came the reply, in a voice as flat as his smile was fake. I had to tilt my head back to look him in the eye. I thrust my hand out to shake his in a manly grip like my dad had taught me. His hand slid past mine, barely touching mine. I disliked him instantly. His expression would have been right at home on a robot that distrusted humans and was secretly planning to revolt and rule the world. The idea that I had once imagined introducing him as “This is my bro, Clarence,” soon became ridiculous.

“I'm going to be an English major,” I said. “What are you studying?” He didn't reply. He continued to unpack his suitcase and milk crates. He didn't have much stuff other than a clothes suitcase. No stereo or sports equipment. Just a small electric typewriter and books. Tons of books. “Clarence?” I asked again.

“Government.” That was it for the small talk. I might be in for a long, and quiet, semester.

I had at least three times as much stuff as my roommate and it was time to unpack. Where should I put it? I looked around the room, it was only a little bigger than a prison cell and about as attractive. The few items of furniture that were left for me could have been hand-me-downs from kids who fought in the First World War. The only place to keep my expensive guitar was on my bunk. Each night I'd have to put it on my desk, and each morning I'd put it back on my bed. Clarence would probably put his foot through the case and crush the thing if I left it out during the day. He probably would not even notice. I should have played the harmonica.

Trying to sleep that first night made me appreciate my old bedroom. The narrow top bunk posed a challenge just to get into it. I had to stand on my chair, then step on my desk. The mattress was lumpy and pushed up against the wall. I couldn't find a position that felt comfortable without dangling my arm over the side like a freshly caught fish, still on the hook. I squirmed and twisted so much that Clarence banged on the bottom of my bunk.

“Cut that crap out,” he growled. “I'm trying to sleep.”

He can talk, I thought. We'll take this one day at a time.

I didn't spend a lot of time in the room. The room was so small. The room was hot. I needed to work in the library... I had dozens of excuses. Each time I returned, Clarence made me feel like an unwelcome guest, who had personally done something terrible to him or his family.

I had never met anyone like him. I had a few black friends in high school, but they were so popular I doubt they would even remember me. The Long Island neighborhood where I lived was nearly all white and the few black kids were all high school heroes. The star basketball player, the football quarterback, the lead saxophone in the dance band—kids like that. They were friendly and hip and had an easy style that made us white kids envious. The black kids were...they were cool. There were three black kids in my high school graduating class of four hundred.

One night Clarence and I worked quietly at our desks. By 'quietly' I mean in complete silence. Ours was the quietest room in the dorm, maybe the whole college. We weren't roommates, we were 'tomb mates' and I was tired of it. I sat at my desk and stared at him. Eventually he looked up and said one word. "What?"

"It's not my fault," I said.

"What's not your fault?" he asked, but the way he said it sounded a lot like "Oh yes it is, and you know it."

"It's not my fault. *I* didn't own slaves."

He took off his glasses and studied me as if searching for the exact right words. Finally he nodded. "Good." He put his glasses back on and went back to his reading.

"I didn't do anything to you. Why are you treating me like this?"

"Please elucidate," he said. "Like what, exactly?"

"Why won't you talk to me?"

"I am talking to you right now. What is the problem?"

"*You* are the problem," I said.

"Fine," he said. "I am the problem. I'm going back to work now. I am glad we were able to clear the air of this pressing issue." And that was pretty much the beginning, middle and end of our conversation. I had a space alien for a roommate. A mysterious creature no more like me than a giant squid or a Tasmanian devil. Maybe my dad was right. Maybe I had made a huge mistake and I had sentenced myself to a year of hard time.

But my father was wrong about one thing. Clarence wasn't a tough kid in a gang. He didn't wear gang colors or tattoos or even a ball cap. Instead, every day, he wore clean khaki pants, a white-button down shirt and a narrow black tie—a real one, not a clip on. Each morning he would set up his ironing board and bring the iron out of hiding and press his slacks and shirt until the creases were sharp as the blade on a stiletto. The Mexican woman who brought us new sheets every week could have reported him for the contraband electric iron, but I think she was scared of him. I know I was.

His desk had carefully stacked file folders full of leaflets from political groups like the Afro American League and Students for Peace and other radical organizations. If I had brought that crap home to my dad, he would have ranted for hours about the 'crazy, commie pinko faggot revolutionaries.' My own desk was a rat's nest of books, papers, and Cliffs Notes. Freshman English majors got socked with a reading list that would have killed Evelyn Wood. I couldn't even see the top of my desk after the third day of classes.

One morning, Clarence finished his fifty one-handed pushups. Instead of dressing in slacks, white shirt and black tie, he unwrapped a brand new shirt, one with a deep V neck. It went nearly to his knees and was so brightly colored it was tough to look at it at six-thirty in the morning when he woke me up with his grunting.

“What the hell is that?” I groaned from under my pile of blankets.

“A dashiki,” he said with no further explanation. Along with loose, baggy jeans, sandals, and mirrored aviator sunglasses, Clarence now resembled an African prince. The only part of his wardrobe that remained the same was the outrageous comb which stayed firmly jammed into the back of his head like a weapon he planned to use in a fight.

Chapter 3

I soon realized my place on campus, and in the scheme of college life: the bottom of the hill, and not because of the location of the freshman dorm. I was just a run-of-the-mill first year student, a dime-a-dozen English major, which I had wrongly assumed would be a piece of cake. *Hell*, I reasoned, *I could already speak English, so how hard could it be?* Biology 101, Psych 101, Government 101...all my courses were entry level 101s. I was going to “college for beginners.”

By the time I crawled out of bed and carefully lowered myself to the floor, Clarence had been gone at least an hour. My first class started at eight, and incredibly, it was pool. Not pool as in eight ball, but pool as in swimming. I had learned to swim when I was four years old, but I had to take swimming lessons all over again. Three times a week I trudged to the aquatic center to swim—naked!—with a bunch of other guys. With just fifteen minutes to get dressed and hustle across campus to my second period class, I had no time to dry my hair. When the weather turned cold, which happened almost immediately, my hair had frozen solid by the time I got to Bailey Hall for my Psych 101 lecture, along with a thousand other kids. When my hair melted, I left a trail of water everywhere I went, like an undiscovered missing link, a species that was half human and half fish.

I wasn't particularly good at anything and I didn't have any idea what I wanted to study. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want a roommate and I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. There was just one thing that I absolutely knew I wanted, and in the first few weeks at Cornell it looked to be a long shot: A girlfriend.

The entry-level course that I really needed, Co-eds 101, wasn't offered. I had barely had a conversation with a girl since I had arrived. There weren't too many of them on campus, and none seemed to have time for anything other than studying. The girls lived on one side of the campus, the guys on the other, a half mile away. The best opportunity to meet a girl outside of class was during dinner, when we were all crowded into the big dining halls.

One cold Thursday night, in late October, I grabbed my guitar and parka and headed up the hill to the Straight cafeteria. It was “Ithacating” outside, which is what we called the ever-present sleet and rain combination which covered everything in frost. It instantly melted and drenched me with cold water when I entered the building.

I balanced my tray with two hot dogs, fried cheese sticks, and tater tots with one hand while I carried the guitar case in the other. I sat down and leaned the case against the big oak table. Although it had not yet happened, maybe a girl, carrying a tray of yogurt and bean sprouts would sit at the table, and make the mistake of asking me, “Do you play?”

There was an unwritten rule about who sat where in the dining hall. The black kids had their own tables at the far end of the room. No one made them do this. The room was as segregated as if the Ku Klux Klan had drawn up the seating arrangements. I had seen Clarence at those tables before. He sat there tonight, right in the middle, laughing and doing some kind of secret handshake with his friends.

So it's just me he doesn't talk to. I stood up, working up the nerve to wander over there and sit down and say hi, like we were best buddies, but I stopped myself. Why bother? We had seen each other. He had made no attempt to invite me to his table. I ate, alone, in silence. I was getting used to that.

I grabbed the guitar and carried the tray to the dish window. Then I was off. There was only one place I wanted to be.

Every kid on campus who sang or played an instrument that you could carry around knew about it. The entrance to Anabel Taylor Hall had marble floors and walls with a vaulted ceiling like a cathedral. We called it the Echo Chamber. The room had a rich, sweet reverberation, which made lousy singers and players—people like me—sound good enough to listen to.

At the end of the long hallway was a coffeehouse called The Commons, and just outside its door was the office of Father Dan, a Catholic priest who was rumored to be on the FBI's Most Wanted list for sabotaging draft records. Father Dan was legendary. Kids claimed to have met him or even worked for him. To me, he was just one more big Cornell mystery, it had nothing to do with me. All I wanted was to sit in the Echo Chamber, play my guitar, and hope a lonely single girl would wander in. Maybe tonight would be the night. Maybe I'd finally get lucky.

The huge door to the Echo Chamber was made of solid oak. It was more like the entrance to an ancient castle than the door to a university building. A stone monument surrounded by steps provided a dry place to sit and play. I knocked the slush off my boots, settled down on the marble steps, and unsnapped the guitar case. I listened to the long decay of the *clack*. Even that sounded good. The room probably wouldn't be too busy on a Thursday night, not like Friday and Saturday when it would quickly fill with kids carrying guitars and banjos.

This education thing was not working out. The lousy weather, loneliness, crappy food and cranky roommate were ganging up on me. My *Blonde on Blonde* songbook rested beneath the big twelve-string. What should I play? What was the perfect song? The picture of Bob Dylan on the cover looked just like I felt. I turned the pages to *Visions of Johanna*, a song with about a hundred verses. Okay, it has five verses—but five *long* ones, about pain and loneliness and awkward silences—it matched my mood perfectly. There are only three chords, which you can learn to play the same day you get a guitar. I didn't know anyone who could remember all the words. That's why I had a songbook.

The twelve-string was a little out of tune, which was normal. It was impossible to tune perfectly. I got it close, then began to play, carefully fingerpicking each note, working myself up to a genuine plaintive Dylan wail. "Ain't it just like the night?" I asked the ghosts in the empty room, "To play tricks when you're trying to be so quiet?" My voice bounced back from the stone walls.

The oak door opened with an ancient creak followed by a blast of cold air sweeping in behind a girl I hadn't seen before. She carried a guitar case. I stopped playing but she nodded and smiled as if she wanted me to keep going. She slipped off her fur coat, sat on the steps and took out her guitar, a well-worn Gibson, a vintage six string with an orange macramé guitar strap. She didn't look anything like the hippie folksinger types who filled the Echo Chamber on a weekend. Small and compact, she had long, straight brown hair, the color of roasted chestnuts, perfectly brushed, flowing to the middle of her back. Dark eyes. Big silver hoop earrings, tailored store-bought bell bottoms, not homemade from an old pair of dungarees. A beige turtle neck sweater just the right amount too big. She put her ear against her guitar and tuned it to mine, so quickly and quietly I didn't believe it would be in tune, but it was. Then, she watched my hand form a chord and she began to play, her long fingernails striking the strings more clearly than any finger picks, hitting each note precisely. She played with me note for note, then strayed off the melody and played new

ones, like little songs, melodies that worked like they were written for it. As if she had discovered the only copy of an unpublished Bob Dylan songbook. Then she began to sing. And I stopped.

My hand felt paralyzed. I couldn't force a sound from my throat.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"You sing like an angel. I can't sing with you. I'll ruin it."

"That's silly. You sound fine. Keep playing. Please." So I did.

She started to sing again, in a soaring voice that filled the room, a voice that didn't need the echo. She never looked at the songbook. She knew all the words, the lyrics to all the verses, complicated obtuse poetry, that seemed to make perfect sense in her voice. Then a shudder went through me...for the first time, the lyrics made sense to me also, though I don't think I could explain why. Somewhere deep in the song, I sang too, and we harmonized. I felt like I was auditioning for the Queen. Somehow it all worked.

I realized something, something big. I knew right away that everything had just changed: God had put me on this earth just to sing and play with this girl whose name I didn't know—not yet. We rolled into the last verse. On the last line, she bent the note and her voiced sailed up the scale to land a full octave above mine...a full octave! The song ended and an icy chill ran down my back as if someone had dumped a bucket of Ithaca slush on me.

The echo took forever to fade. She sat, hugging the guitar across her knees and smiling, waiting for me to say something. I realized I was suddenly, desperately in love with her. I had never felt this way before. Not with anyone, not ever.

"What's your name?" I finally managed.

"Melissa." For the first time since leaving home I knew exactly what I wanted.

