

I Never Ast No Favors

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Dear Mr. Marino:

I hesitate to take pen in hand and write you because I guess you do not remember me except maybe as a punk kid you did a good turn, and I know you must be a busy man running your undertaking parlor as well as the Third Ward and your barber shop. I never ast no favors of nobody but this is a special case which I hope you will agree when I explain.

To refresh your memory as the mouthpiece says in court, my name is Anthony Cornaro only maybe you remember me better as Tough Tony, which is what they call me back home in the Ward. I am not the Tough Tony from Water Street who is about 55 and doing a sixer up the river, I am the Tough Tony who is going on seventeen from Brecker Street and who you got probation for last week after I slash that nosy cop that comes flatfooting into the grocery store where some friends and I are just looking around not knowing it is after hours and that the groceryman has went home. That is the Tough Tony that I am. I guess you remember me now so I can go ahead.

With the probation, not that I am complaining, the trouble starts. The mouthpiece says he has known this lad for years and he comes from a very fine churchgoing family and he has been led astray by bad companions. So all

right, the judge says three years' probation, but he goes on to say if. If this, if that, environment, bad influences, congested city streets, our vital dairy industry denuded—such a word from a judge!—of labor . . .

Before I know what has happened, I am signing a paper, my Mama is putting her mark on it and I am on my way to Chiunga County to milk cows.

I figure the judge does not know I am a personal friend of yours and I do not want to embarrass you by mentioning your name in open court, I figure I will get a chance later to straighten things out. Also, to tell you the truth, I am too struck with horror to talk.

On the ride upstate I am handcuffed to the juvenile court officer so I cannot make a break for it, but at last I get time to think and I realise that it is not as bad as it looks. I am supposed to work for a dame named Mrs. Parry and get chow, clothes and Prevailing Wages. I figure it takes maybe a month for her to break me in on the cow racket or even longer if I play dumb. During the month I get a few bucks, a set of threads and take it easy and by then I figure you will have everything straightened out and I can get back to my regular occupation, only more careful this time. Experience is the best teacher, Mr. Marino, as I am sure you know.

Well, we arrive at this town Chiunga Forks and I swear to God I never saw such a creepy place. You wouldn't believe it. The main drag is all of four blocks long and the stores and houses are from wood. I expect to see Gary Cooper stalking down the street with a scowl on his puss and his hands on his guns looking for the bad guys. Four hours from the Third Ward in a beat-up '48 police department Buick—you wouldn't believe it.

We park in front of a hash house, characters in rubber boots gawk at us, the court officer takes off the cuffs and gabs with the driver but does not lose sight of me. While we are waiting for this Mrs. Parry to keep the date I study the bank building across the street and develop some ideas which will interest you, Mr. Marino, but which I will not go into right now.

All of a sudden there is a hassle on the sidewalk.

A big woman with grey hair and a built like Tony Galento is kicking a little guy who looks like T.B. Louis the Book, who I guess you know, but not so muscular and wearing overalls. She is kicking him right in the keister, five-six times. Each time I shudder, and so maybe does the bank building across the street.

"Shoot my, dawg, will you!" she yells at the character. "I said I'd kick your butt from here toScranton when I caught up with you, Dud Wingle!"

"Leave me be!" he squawks, trying to pry her hands off his shoulders. "He was chasin' deer! He was chasin' deer!"

Thud—thud—thud. "I don't keer if he was chasin' deer, panthers or butterflies." Thud. "He was my dawg and you shot him!" Thud. She was drawing quite a crowd. The characters in rubber boots are forgetting all about us to stare at her and him.

Up comes a flatfoot who I later learn is the entire manpower of Chiunga Forks' lousiest; he says to the big woman: "Now, Ella" a few times, and she finally stops booting the little character and lets him go. "What do you want, Henry?" she growls at the flatfoot and he asks weakly: "Silver Bell dropped her calf yet?"

The little character is limping away rubbing himself. The big broad watches him regretfully and says to the flatfoot: "Yesterday, Henry. Now if you'll excuse me I have to look for my new hired boy from the city. I guess that's him over there."

She strolls over to us and yanks open the Buick's door, almost taking it off the hinges. "I'm Mrs. Ella Parry," she says to me, sticking out her hand. "You must be the Cornaro boy the Probation Association

people wired me about."

I shake hands and say, "Yes, ma'am."

The officer turns me over grinning like a skunk eating beans.

I figure Mrs. Parry lives in one of the wood houses in

Chiunga Forks, but no. We climb into a this-year Willys truck and take off for the hills. I do not have much to say to this lady wrestler but wish I had somebody smuggle me a rod to kind of even things a little between her and me. With that built she could break me in half by accident. I try to get in good with her by offering to customize her truck. "I could strip off the bumpers and put on a couple of foglights, maybe new fenders with a little trim to them," I say, "and it wouldn't cost you a dime. Even out here there has got to be some parts place where a person can heist what he needs."

"Quiet, Bub," she says all of a sudden, and shields her eyes peering down a side road where a car is standing in front of a shack. "I swear," she says, "that looks like Dud Wingle's Ford in front of Miz' Sigafos' place." She keeps her neck twisting around to study it until it is out of sight. And she looks worried.

I figure it is not a good time to talk and anyway maybe she has notions about customizing and does not approve of it.

"What," she says, "would Dud Wingle want with Miz' Sigafos?"

"I don't know, ma'am," I say. "Wasn't he the gentleman you was kicking from here to Scranton?"

"Shucks, Bub, that was just a figger of speech. If I'd of wanted to kick him from here to Scranton I'd of done it. Dud and Jim and Ab and Sime think they got a right to shoot your dog if he chases the deer. I'm a peaceable woman or I'd have the law on them for shootin' Grip. But maybe I did kind of lose my temper." She looked worrieder yet.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" I ask. You never can tell, but a lot of old dames talk to me like I was their uncle; to tell you the truth this is my biggest problem in a cathouse. It must be because I am a kind of thoughtful guy and it shows.

Mrs. Parry is no exception. She says to me: "You don't know the folks up here yet, Bub, so you don't know about Miz' Sigafos. I'm old English stock so I don't

hold with their foolishness, but——" And here she looked real worried. "Miz' Sigafos is what they call a hex doctor."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Just a lot of foolishness. Don't you pay any attention," she says, and then she has to concentrate on the driving. We are turning off the two-lane state highway and going up, up, up into the hills, off a blacktop road, off a gravel road, off a dirt road. No people. No houses. Fences and cows or maybe horses, I can't tell for sure. Finally we are at her place, which is from wood and in two buildings. I start automatically for the building that is clean, new-painted, big and expensive.

"Hold on, Bub," she says. "No need to head for the barn first thing. Let's get you settled in the house first and then there'll be a plenty of work for you."

I do a double take and see that the big, clean, expensive building is the barn. The little, cheap, rundown place is the house. I say to myself: "Tough Tony, you're gonna pray tonight that Mr. Marino don't forget to tell the judge you're a personal friend of his and get you out of this,"

But that night I do not pray. I am too tired. After throwing sacks of scratch feed and laying mash around, I run the baling machine and I turn the oats in the loft and I pump water until my back is aching jello and then I go hiking out to the woodlot and chop down trees and cut them up with a chain saw. It is surprising how fast I learn and how willing I am when I remember what Mrs. Parry did to Dud Wingle.

I barely get to sleep it seems like when Mrs. Parry is yanking the covers off me laughing and I see through the window that the sky is getting a little light. "Time to rise, Bub," she bawls. "Breakfast on the table." She strides to the window and flexes her muscles, breathing deep. "It's going to be a fine day. I can tell when an animal's sick to death, and I can tell when it's going to be fine all day. Rise and shine,

Bub. We have a lot of work ahead. I was

kind of easy on you yesterday seeing you was new here, so we got a bit behindhand."

I eye the bulging muscles and say "Yes, ma'am."

She serves a good breakfast, I have to admit. Usually I just have some coffee around eleven when I wake up and maybe a meatball sandwich around four, but the country air gives you an appetite like I always heard. Maybe I didn't tell you there was just the two of us. Her husband kicked off a couple years ago. She gave one of her boys half the farm because she says she don't believe in letting them hang around without a chance to make some money and get married until you die. The other boy, nineteen, got drafted two months ago and since then she is running the place on her own hook because for some reason or other it is hard to get people to work on a farm. She says she does not understand this and I do not enlighten her.

First thing after breakfast she tells me to make four crates from lumber in the toolshed, go to the duckpond and put the four Muscovy ducks in the crates so she can take them to town and sell them. She has been meaning to sell the Muscovy ducks for some time since the word has been getting around that she was pro-communist for having such a breed of ducks when there were plenty of good American ducks she could of raised. "Though," she says, "in my opinion the Walterses ought to sell off their Peking ducks too because the Chinese are just as bad as the Roossians."

I make the crates which is easy and I go to the duck-pool. There are four ducks there but they are not swimming; they have sunk. I go and tell Mrs. Parry and she looks at me like I was crazy.

"Yeah," I tell her. "Sunk. Down at the bottom of the pond, drowned. I guess maybe during the night they forgot to keep treading water or something."

She didn't say a word. She just strides down the path to the duckpond and looks into it and sees the four ducks. They are big, horrible things with kind of red Jimmy Valentine masks over their eyes, and they are lying at the bottom of the pond. She wades in, still without a word,

and fishes them out. She gets a big shiv out of her apron pocket, slits the ducks open, yanks out their lungs and slits them open. Water dribbles out.

"Drownded," she mutters. "If there was snapping turtles to drag them under . . . but there ain't."

I do not understand what the fuss is about and ast her if she can't sell them anyway. She says no, it wouldn't be honest, and I should get a shovel and bury them. Then there is an awful belling from the cowbarn. "Agnes of Lincolnshire!" Mrs. Parry squawks and dashes for the barn. "She's dropping her calf ahead of time!"

I run along beside her. "Should I call the cops?" I pant. "They always get to the place before the ambulance and you don't have to pay them nothing. My married sister had three kids delivered by the cops—"

But it seems it's different with cows and anyway they have a different kind of flatfoot out here that didn't go to Police Academy. Mrs. Parry finally looks up from the calf and says "I think I saved it. I know I saved it. I can tell when an animal's dying. Bub, go to the phone and call Miz' Croley and ask her if she can possibly spare Brenda to come over and do the milkin' tonight and tomorrow morning. I dassn't leave Agnes and the calf; they need nursing."

I stagger out of the cowbarn, throw up two-three times and go to the phone in the house. I seen them phones with flywheels in the movies so I know how to work it. Mrs. Croley cusses and moans and then says all right she'll send Brenda over in the Ford and please to tell Mrs. Parry not to keep her no longer than she has to because she has a herd of her own that needs milking.

I tell Mrs. Parry in the barn and Mrs. Parry snaps that Mrs. Croley has a living husband and a draft-proof farmhand and she swore she didn't know what things were coming to when a neighbor wouldn't help another neighbor out.

I ast casually: "Who is this Brenda, ma'am?"

"Miz' Croley's daughter. Good for nothing."

I don't ask no more questions but I sure begin to wait

with interest for a Ford to round the bend of the road.

It does while I am bucking up logs with the chainsaw. Brenda is a blondie about my age, a little too big for her dress—an effect which I always go for, whether in the Third Ward or Chiunga County. I don't have a chance to talk to her until lunch, and then all she does is giggle. But who wants conversation? Then a truck comes snorting up the driveway. Something inside the truck is snorting louder than the truck.

Mrs. Parry throws up her hands. "Land, I forgot! Belshazzar the Magnificent for Princess Leilani!" She gulps coffee and dashes out.

"Brenda," I said, "what was that all about?"

She giggles and this time blushes. I throw down my napkin and go to the window. The truck is being backed to a field with a big board fence around it. Mrs. Parry is going into the barn and is leading a cow into the field. The cow is mighty nervous and I begin to understand why. The truckdriver opens the tailgate and out comes a snorting bull.

I think: well, I been to a few stag shows but this I never seen before. Maybe a person can learn something in the country after all.

Belshazzar the Magnificent sees Princess Leilani. He snorts like Charles Boyer. Princess Leilani cowers away from him like Bette Davis. Belshazzar the Magnificent paws the ground. Princess Leilani trembles. And then Belshazzar the Magnificent yawns and starts eating grass.

Princess Leilani looks up, startled and says: "Huh?" No, on second thought it is not Princess Leilani who says "Huh?" It is Brenda, at the other kitchen window. She sees me watching her, giggles, blushes and goes to the shik and starts doing dishes.

I guess this is a good sign, but I don't press my luck. I go outside, where Mrs. Parry is cussing out the



truck-driver. "Some bull!" she yells at him. "What am I supposed to do now? How long is Leilani going to stay in season? What if I can't line up another stud for her? Do you realise what it's going to cost me in veal and milk

checks—" Yatata, yatata, yatata, while the truckdriver keeps trying to butt hi with excuses and Belshazzar the Magnificent eats grass and sometimes gives Princess Lei-lani a brotherly lick on the nose, for by that time Princess Leilani has dropped the nervous act and edged over mooing plaintively.

Mrs. Parry yells: "See that? I don't hold with artificial insemination but you dang stockbreeders are driving us dairy farmers to it! Get your—your steer off my property before I throw him off! I got work to do even if he hasn't! Belshazzar the Magnificent—hah"

She turns on me. "Don't just stand around gawking, Bub. When you get the stovewood split you can stack it in the woodshed." I scurry off and resume Operation Woodlot, but I take it a little easy which I can do because Mrs. Parry is in the cowbarn nursing Agnes of Lincolnshire and the preemie calf.

The next morning at breakfast I am in a bad temper, Brenda has got the giggles and Mrs. Parry is stiff and tired from sleeping hi the barn. We are a gruesome threesome, and then a car drives up and a kid of maybe thirty comes bursting into the kitchen. He has been crying. His eyes are red and there are clean places on his face where the tears ran down. "Ma!" he whimpers at Mrs. Parry. "I got to talk to you! You got to talk to Bonita, she says I don't love her no more and she's going to leave me!"

"Hush up^ George," she snaps at him. "Come into the parlor." They go into the parlor and Brenda whistles: "Whoo-ee! Wait'111 tell Maw about this!"

"Who is he?"

"Miz' Parry's boy George. She gave him the south half of the farm and built him a house on it. Bonita's his wife. She's a stuck-up girl from Ware County and she wears falsies and dyes her hair and—" Brenda looks around, lowers her voice and whispers "—and she sends her worshipping to the laundry in town."

"God in Heaven," I say. "Have the cops heard about this?"

"Oh, it's legal, but you just shouldn't do it."

"I see. I misunderstood, I guess. Back in the Third Ward it's a worse rap than mopery with intent to gawk. The judges are ruthless with it."

Her eyes go round. "Is that a fact?"

"Sure. Tell your mother about it."

Mrs. Parry came back hi with her son and said to us: "Clear out, you kids. I want to make a phone call."

"I'll start the milkin'," Brenda said.

"And I'll framble the portistan while it's still cool and barkney," I say.

"Sure," Mrs. Parry says, cranking the phone. "Go and do that, Bub." She is preoccupied.

I go through the kitchen door, take one sidestep, flatten against the house and listen. Reception is pretty good.

"Bonita?" Mrs. Parry says into the phone. "Is that you, Bonita? Listen, Bonita, George is here and he asked me to call you and tell you he's sorry. I ain't exactly going to say that. I'm going to say that you're acting like a blame fool . . ." She chuckles away from the phone and says: "She wants to talk to you, George/Don't be too eager, boy."

I slink away from the kitchen door, thinking: "Ah-hah!" I am thinking so hard that Mrs. Parry bumbles into me when she walks out of the kitchen sooner than I expect.

She grabs me with one of those pipe-wise hands and snaps: "You young devil, were you listening to me

on the phone?"

Usually, it is the smart thing to deny everything and ast for your mouthpiece, but up here they got no mouthpieces. For once I tell the truth and cop a plea. "Yes, Mrs. Parry. I'm so ashamed of myself you can't imagine. I always been like that. It's a psy-cho-logical twist I got for listening. I can't seem to control it. Maybe I read too many bad comic books. But honest, I won't breathe a word." Here I have the sense to shut up.

She shakes her head. "What about the ducks that sank and Agnes dropping her calf before her time? What about

Belshazzar?" She begins to breathe through her nostrils. "It's hexin', that's what it is!"

"What's hexin', ma'am?"

"Heathen doings by that old Miz' Sigafos. She's been warned and warned plenty to stick to her doctoring. I hold nothing against her for curing the croup or maybe selling a young man love potion if he's goin' down to Scranton to sell his crop and play around a little. But she's not satisfied with that, I guess. Dud Wingle must of gone to her with a twenty-dollar bill to witch my farm!"

I do not know what to make of this. My mama, of course, has told me about la vecchia religione, but I never know they believe in stuff like that over here. "Can you go to the cops, ma'am?" I ast.

She snorts like Belshazzar the Magnificent. "Cops! A fat lot old Henry Bricker would know about witchin'. No, Bub, I guess I'll handle this myself. I ain't the five-times-great-granddaughter of Pru Posthlewate for nothin'!"

"Who was Pru— what you said?"

"Hanged in Salem, Massachusettes, in 1680 for witchcraft. Her coven name was Little Gadfly, but I guess she wasn't so little. The first two ropes broke—but we got no time to stand around talkin'. I got to find my Ma's truck in the attic. You go get the black rooster from the chicken run. I wonder where there's some chalk?" And she walks off to the house, mumbling. I walk to the chicken run thinking she

has flipped.

The black rooster is a tricky character, very fast on his feet and also I am new at the chicken racket. It takes me half an hour to stalk him down, during which time incidentally the Ford leaves with Brenda in it and George drives away in his car. See you later, Brenda, I think to myself.

I go to the kitchen door with the rooster screaming in my arms and Mrs. Parry says: "Come on in with him and set him anywhere." I do, Mrs. Parry scatters some cornflakes on the floor and the rooster calms down right away and stalks around picking it up. Mrs. Parry is sweaty and

dust-covered and there are some dirty old papers rolled up on the kitchen table.

She starts fooling around on the floor with one of the papers and a hunk of carpenter's chalk, and just to be doing something I look at the rest of them. Honest to God, you never saw such lousy spelling and handwriting. Tayke the Duste off one Olde Ymmage Quhich Ye Myn-gel—like that.

I shake my head and think: it's the cow racket. No normal human being can take this life. She has flipped and I don't blame her, but it will be a horrible thing if it becomes homicidal. I look around for a poker or something and start to edge away. I am thinking of a dash from the door to the Willys and then scorching into town to come back with the men in the little white coats.

She looks up at me and says: "Don't go away, Bub. This is woman's work, but I need somebody to hold the sword and palm and you're the onliest one around." She grins. "I guess you never saw anything like this in the city, hey?"

"No, ma'am," I say, and notice that my voice is very faint.

"Well, don't let it skeer you. There's some people it'd skeer, but the Probation Association people say they call you Tough Tony, so I guess you won't take fright."

"No, ma'am."

"Now what do we do for a sword? I guess this bread knife—no; the ham slicer. It looks more like a sword. Hold it in your left hand and get a couple of them gilded bulrushes from the vase in the parlor. Mind you wipe your feet before you tread on the carpet! And then come back. Make it fast."

She starts to copy some stuff that looks like Yiddish writing onto the floor and I go into the parlor. I am about to tiptoe to the front door when she yells: "Bub! That you?"

Maybe I could beat her in a race for the car, maybe not. I shrug. At least I have a knife—and know how to use it. I bring her the gilded things from the vase. Ugh!

While I am out she has cut the head off the rooster and is sprinkling its blood over a big chalk star and the writing on the floor. But the knife makes me feel more confident even though I begin to worry about how it will look if I have to do anything with it. I am figuring that maybe I can hamstring her if she takes off after me, and meanwhile I should humor her because maybe she will snap out of it.

"Bub," she says, "hold the sword and palms in front of you pointing up and don't step inside the chalk lines. Now, will you promise me not to tell anybody about the words I speak? The rest of this stuff don't matter; it's down in all the books and people have their minds made up that it don't work. But about the words, do you promise?"

"Yes, ma'am. Anything you say, ma'am."

So she starts talking and the promise was not necessary because it's in some foreign language and I don't talk foreign languages except sometimes a little Italian to my mama. I am beginning to yawn when I notice that we have company.

He is eight feet tall, he is green, he has teeth like Red Riding Hood's grandma.

I dive through the window, screaming.

When Mrs. Parry comes out she finds me in a pile of broken glass, on my knees, praying. She clamps two fingers on my ear and hoists me to my feet. "Stop that praying," she says. "He's complaining about it."

Says it makes him itch. And you said you wouldn't be skeered! Now come inside where I can keep an eye on you and behave yourself. The idea! The very idea!"

To tell you the truth, I don't remember what happens after this so good. There is some talk between the green character and Mrs. Parry about her five-times-great-grandmother who, it seems, is doing nicely in a warm climate. There is an argument in which the green character gets shifty and says he doesn't know who is working for Miz' Sigafos these days. Miz' Parry threatens to let me pray again and the green character gets sulky and says

all right he'll send for him and rassel with him but he is sure he can lick him.

The next thing I recall is a grunt-and-groan exhibition between the green character and a smaller purple character who must of arrived when I was blacked out or something. This at least I know something about because I am a television fan. It is a very slow match, because when one of the characters, for instance, bends the other character's arm it just bends and does not break. But a good big character can lick a good little character every time and finally greenface has got his opponent tied into a bow-knot.

"Be gone," Mrs. Parry says to the purple character, "and never more molest me or mine. Be gone, be gone, be gone."

He is gone, and I never do find out if he gets unknotted.

"Now fetch me Miz' Sigafos."

Blip! An ugly little old woman is sharing the ring with the winner and new champeen. She spits at Mrs. Parry: "So you it was dot mine Teufel haff ge-schtolen!" Her English is terrible. A greenhorn.

"This ain't a social call, Miz' Sigafos," Mrs. Parry says coldly. "I just want you to unwitch my farm and kinfolks. And if you're an honest woman you'll return his money to that sneakin', dog-murderin' shiftless squirt, Dud Wingle."

"Yah," the old woman mumbles. She reaches up and feels the biceps of the green character. "Yah, I guess maybe dot I besser do. Who der Yunger iss?" She is looking at me. "For why the teeth on his

mouth go clop-clop-clop? Und so white the face on his head iss! You besser should feed him, Ella."

"Missus Parry to you, Miz' Sigafos, if you don't mind. Now the both of you be gone, be gone, be gone."

At last we are alone.

"Now," Mrs. Parry grunts, "maybe we can get back to farmin'. Such foolishness and me a busy woman." She looks at me closely and says: "I do believe the old fool was right. You're as white as a sheet." She feels my fore-

head. "Oh, shoot! You have a temperature. You better get to bed. If you ain't better in the morning I'll call Doc Mines."

So I am in the bedroom writing this letter, Mr. Marino, and I hope you will help me out. Like I said, I never ast no favors but this is special.

Mr. Marino, will you please go to the judge and tell him I have a change of heart and don't want no probation? Tell him I want to pay my debt to society. Tell him I want to go to jail for three years, and for them to come and get me right away. Sincerely,

ANTHONY (Tough Tony) CORNARO.

P.S.—On my way to get a stamp for this I notice that I have some grey hairs, which is very unusual for a person going on seventeen. Please tell the judge I wouldn't mind if they give me solitary confinement and that maybe it would help me pay my debt to society.

In haste, T.T.