

## **Dorm Life**

**When my parents dropped me off at the Quadrangle dorm in Iowa City at The University of Iowa, on that beautiful crisp fall day in mid-September of 67, I had very few expectations. The previous week I had been on campus for Freshman Orientation. Several thousand Freshman were seated in a huge auditorium while various administrators covered a variety of rules, regs, and protocols. Just as I was about to lapse into a boredom induced coma, the Dean of the Whole Damn University took the stage. Without preamble he stated: "Look to the person on your right." We all did. "Now look to the person to your left." We again complied. "Since only fifty percent of you will graduate from this institution, you will probably not see either one of them at commencement." I took another gander to the prospective students on either side of me and thought; "those lucky bastards are going to get a college degree".**

**After my folks had helped transfer the few belongings that I had thought would be useful for dorm life, from the car to my room, they hugged me and drove away. I appraised my current situation. I didn't want to be in school, I wasn't sure what life in a building with hundreds of other guys was going to be like, but my mom's overarching control of my life seemed to be significantly receding the further down the road**

they went. Then my new roommates showed up. One I knew from high school because he lived a block away and we had requested to be roomies. We weren't good buddies but figured it would be nice to have one familiar face around. The other was a flamboyant Jewish dude from Chicago.

"Hi, I'm Al Dochman. You can call me Doc" he exuded as we shook hands. I told him that I was Dick C. which elicited a snicker but no comment from Doc. Then my friend from the neighborhood took his turn. "Hi, I'm Francis M.". "Francis?" Doc derided. "That won't do. What's your middle name?" "Carrol", Francis meekly replied. Doc gave me an astonished look and said "He's kidding, right?"

"No, that is actually his middle name." Me

"Well, that won't do either. *Please* tell me that you have a nickname." Doc

"I do." Said Francis, hoping for redemption.

"Well, tell me what it is for god's sake" Doc again.

**“Maude” Francis said softly, realizing that redemption was not going to be in the cards.**

**I thought that the top of Doc’s head was going to come off. Thus began the three-way relationship of Doc and I picking mercilessly on poor Francis, Carrol, “Maude”, M. Though not very bright, Francis was determined to be a good student. He tried to study in the dorm room and he tried to go to bed at a reasonable time so he would be fresh for class the next morning. All the while Doc and I made him the target of our adolescent pranks and crude hazing. It is the only time in my life that I remember having been a bully and it was wrong, wrong, wrong. I have recently offered Francis an apology through our Washington HS, Class of 67 website but he has chosen not to respond. That being said, one last anecdote.**

**Doc eventually grossed me out with his lack of personal hygiene and unwillingness to clean up after himself, so I forced him to trade places with a huge, quiet, clean, Syrian guy named George from down the hall. I had to bring in a Norwegian exchange student to broker the trade. But right before the move the following incident took place. It was a rare quiet day in our dorm room. A Sunday afternoon. Doc had actually cleaned up his shit and taken a shower. There was an equally rare period of peace and harmony between the three roomies as Doc and I were taking a much-needed**

break from picking on Francis. Francis had announced that he was going to go down to the lounge and get a snack from the vending machine. Doc was lounging on his bunk and I was trying to think of something to do that did not involve studying. The phone rang. I answered it.

It was Francis' dad, Francis Carrol M. senior. He asked to speak to his son. I told him that Francis had stepped out for a few minutes and asked if I could take a message. He initially demurred but after a few seconds changed his mind.

“Since you and Francis have been friends for a while, I guess I can tell you what has happened”. Apparently, Francis had not shared how horribly I had been treating him.

“Francis' Uncle Joe passed away this morning”. Senior

“I'm sorry to hear that”. Me

“Just tell him to call me and I will break the news.” Senior

I hung up the phone and turned toward Doc who was staring at me with a sharply inquisitive look.

**“What’s going on? Who was that?” Doc inquired aggressively.**

**“That was Francis’ dad. He said that Francis’ Uncle Joe just passed away”.**

**A few moments of silence ensued, then Doc started to cackle.**

**“You know Francis. He will make like his Uncle Joe was the most important person in his world and that he is devastated by the loss.”**

**I started to join in the laughter and we traded a few more quips about Francis being a drama queen. As our laughter hit full crescendo, Francis walked in the door.**

**“What’s so funny?” he stated, eager to share in our mirth.**

**In my mind I envisioned replying “Your Uncle Joe is dead”. I had been unmercifully mean and cruel to Francis for the past couple of months but cracking wise about the demise of a**

family member was beyond the pale, even for me and Doc. I tried to stop laughing and think of a plausible story to explain why we were yukking it up, then somehow segue into telling him about the death of his uncle. I immediately realized that I could not look anywhere in the vicinity of Doc or we would both start giggling like lunatics again.

I finally calmed down, babbled some inane excuse for our frivolity, and directed Francis to call his father. As Francis was dialing his dad, Doc and I made the mistake of looking at each other again. I had to immediately look away and literally bite my tongue to keep from laughing. A few minutes of quiet, earnest conversation passed between father and son. Finally, Francis hung up the phone and walked over by the window. He gazed wistfully out over the courtyard for a few minutes. When he turned his gaze around to face us, he had that mischievous little Francis smile. "I always thought that Uncle Joe was a big asshole". We all erupted into peals of laughter.

I also got picked on by Doc. A little. Doc thought that my Iowa accent was hilarious. This was best showcased when I talked about what high school I had attended and when I was planning on laundering my clothes. I washed my clothes and I graduated from Worshington High. There were a lot of other Jewish guys from Chicago in our dorm and Doc really enjoyed bringing them into our room and having me say where I

attended high school. I quickly realized that they took a lot of ethnic pride in being Jewish. At some point one of them asked me about my ethnic background. Even though my Grandad Carnal was Irish proud I had never really thought about what my pedigree was. Or anyone else's for that matter. It was just something that never occurred to me as it was never discussed by my folks. I could tell who was black and who was white, but beyond that all those white people looked the same to me. And I believe that naivete served me well. It was one less metric that people often used to pre-judge each other that did not factor into my thinking.

That weekend I went home to my folk's place and inquired, "What are we?". They weren't sure what I was getting at, so I clarified. "Grandad Carnal is Irish, one of my roommates is Jewish, what are we?" Turned out that mom was a Hines 57 mix of Western European flavors and Dad believed that he was mostly Irish. That was proven to be only partially true when Ancestry .com came online. Turns out that some British colonialist, Patrick C., had stopped by County Cork long enough to get hitched to one of the local lasses, Mary O'Neill. They then journeyed on to America to produce a prolific family with nine kids that pretty much every Carnal in the US is descended from.

**When George, the Syrian guy, moved in and mid-term flunk notices came out the whole dynamic changed and things became a lot more serious and a lot quieter in our corner of the dorm.**