Angelo's Saturdays

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On tiptoes, Angelo looked out the window with his nose pressed against the windowpane. Although it was summer and the humidity seemed to drape over his skin like a wet wool blanket, the window was closed. Looking down three stories into the unpaved alley, he could see the top of the wooden privy[1] that was propped up against the building. All the tenants who lived in Angelo's building used this privy—there were no toilets in the building itself because it was not connected to the city sewer system. If the building's tenants were fortunate (especially the families who lived in the back), the owner of the building might hire a scavenger service to empty it out. Otherwise the contents of the privy (as well as the neighboring ones) continued to fester in the humid August air. The stench hung day and night; keeping the window closed barely kept the fetid air at bay—especially after it rained, when the contents of the privies would overflow and seep slowly into the dirt floor alley. When summer first arrived, Angelo thought he might throw up from the smell, but he had gotten used to it, along with the other squalid living conditions on the Near West Side of Chicago.

The year was 1898 and the 19th Ward, where Angelo's family had settled, was home to thousands of Eastern and Southern European immigrants.

After surveying the alley, Angelo looked southeast out over rooftops and daydreamed what it would be like to be rich in this city. His friend, Vito Gentile, who also lived in the tenement, told him that not all neighborhoods in the city were like this: rich people actually lived in Chicago, too. Vito had tried to teach him the names of some of the most famous families: "the McCormicks, the Palmers, the Marshall Fields..."

Vito told Angelo that many rich people lived in huge mansions only a few miles away.

"You see, Angelo," Vito said with a mischievous grin, "if you learn to read and write English, maybe you can be a rich, fat man who lives on Prairie Avenue in a house that has a bathroom with a toilet."

Such comments frustrated Angelo. Vito was going to a brand new school, Gladstone Elementary, only a few blocks away. Vito was the youngest of four; since his older siblings were all working, he was able to go to school. Angelo, on the other hand, was the eldest son, and his family desperately needed the money he made from selling newspapers. The $1.00 he brought home each week was about 25 percent of their income.

As was common in immigrant neighborhoods, people from the same villages frequently lived near each other; both Angelo and Vito's families had come from Vallelunga, Sicily. But Vito now had other friends at school and his command of English surpassed, "My name is Angelo Blandino." Angelo felt increasingly frustrated.

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The atmosphere at home compounded Angelo's mixed feelings. He had only been in Chicago for a year, but the memory of his homeland seemed to recede with every waft of stench from the alley below. He pleaded with his grandfather to describe to him the home his family had left in Sicily and the small but beautiful plot of land they had farmed for generations. His grandfather talked of the ancient olive trees and the taste of newly squeezed lemons over roasted lamb that had been slaughtered to mark a special occasion. As Angelo was lulled to sleep,

he could almost feel the hot, dry wind called the *sirocco* that blew north from Africa over the rocky terrain. Angelo longed to know this land and to touch its soil that his great-great-grandfather had worked.

As the Blandinos all lived, ate, and slept in one crowded room, it was not difficult for Angelo to hear the conversations that took place after they thought he was asleep. His mother would scold his grandfather: "Yes, yes, yes, Vallelunga is as beautiful as you say it is. But I will tell you what is not beautiful: working that dry, stone-like soil. It could hardly ever feed us when I was a little girl. Do you want to put these notions in Angelo's head so that he wants to go back and suffer some more? Besides, there are no possibilities of any jobs other than working the land—I want him to have a better life."

His grandfather would reply, "I think working that land is better than working as a newsboy downtown—wherever that is. I have heard that there are all sorts of bad boys there who aren't afraid to lie, steal, and who knows what else."

Then his mother would just sigh and say, "It breaks my heart that only a few blocks away is a school that he could go to if we just didn't need that money. Vito's English is improving; I am sure in no time he will be able to apprentice himself to a tailor or in a shop."

His father would then say in a soft tone, "Sandra, you know we need the money Angelo earns. He could probably make more in one of those metal-stamping or tobacco factories, though."

To this response, his mother would always raise her voice slightly and would become more animated: "You know the air in those factories is foul and disgusting. He will get sick there! At least as a newsboy, he is out of this

neighborhood where I am sure the air is much better for him to breathe." Then both parents would stop talking, not knowing any longer what to say. His mother would sob softly. "You'll see," his father would try to reassure her, "someday he will learn English and maybe be a shopkeeper, or maybe he will be the priest of a large parish."

If these conversations occurred while Angelo was still awake, he would cover his ears. He did not want to be a priest; he did not want to be a shopkeeper, or a tailor, or a grocer. He wanted to paint—not walls, but pictures of faraway places. As Angelo saw the pictures in his head, he imagined that the paintings would have the ability to transport anyone looking at them to a world away from this city.

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Noticing a dead workhorse stopped Angelo from daydreaming over the rooftops any longer. It was anybody's guess when the city would pick it up, if at all.[2] It was such a common sight that the young children running past it didn't even seem to notice. They continued their game, scampering up and down the alley, in and out of dilapidated wooden sheds, jumping over piles of rotting vegetables and meat bones and little cesspool puddles.

Because Angelo's work as a newsboy required that he get up early, the darkness helped to shield these sights from him. In between sales, he would shine shoes or maybe pitch pennies with a friend.[3] Today, however, he was not a newsboy. He washed his face and hands as best he could. With a kiss and "I'll see you later," he left his mother. With a spring in his step he ran down one flight of stairs to the Gentiles's apartment.

Angelo paused before knocking on the Gentiles's door. Then he took a deep breath and knocked. Vito ran out, grabbing his arm as they ran down the stairs. Today was Saturday, and they were going to Hull House.

Vito was two years older than Angelo, and Angelo saw their walks to Hull House as his only chance to learn this strange, flat-sounding language called English. Vito would say a word or phrase and then Angelo would try to imitate him.

"Say, 'Hello,'" Vito would command as they walked. Angelo's mouth would move slowly, but he could barely utter this odd, guttural sound. "Aaaaallo." Vito would roll his eyes and command, "Again!"

"Good day," was easier, but the "wh" sound as in "Where is . . . " was as troublesome as "Hello." Vito's impatience grew quickly and he would start exclaiming in Sicilian, "You know, Angelo, if you can't even say 'Hello!' and 'Where is the post office?' or whatever, you will never get out of that stinking alley!"

Angelo's blood would boil, but he would try and try again. When something remotely sounding like English might emerge from his lips, Vito would grudgingly shrug his shoulders and exclaim, "That's O.K., but it won't get you far on Prairie Avenue!"

They would continue to walk briskly north from their home on Taylor to Polk Street and then five blocks east toward Halsted. They passed crowded tenement after tenement. Some were small frame houses and others were built with brick. Wooden window frames that needed repair hung down; front entry doors missed knobs; steps were either ill-repaired or missing. Children hung out of windows and seemed to fill every nook and cranny between the buildings. But the boys hardly seemed to notice the

surrounding sights. Upon reaching Halsted, they turned south and headed toward the mass of solid brick buildings known as Hull House.

In comparison to the rundown and over-crowded buildings they had just passed, the buildings that comprised Hull House were all brick, mostly new and stately in appearance. Angelo loved to get to Hull House early to work his way through the corridors and rooms that led back to the Boys' Building. He would peek his head in and out of rooms to see the activities taking place.

There was a science lecture in one room, singing classes in another, children listening to a story, boys hurdling over a horse in the gymnasium, and in the day-nursery babies were being fed, washed, and bounced on someone's knee while their mothers were at work. Angelo liked to tiptoe into the nursery and see the copies of paintings of Madonnas by della Robbia and Raphael—artists, his Hull House teacher told him, who had lived and painted in Italy hundreds of years ago.[4]

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At the door of the Boys' Building, Angelo and Vito noticed a woman and a man standing in the main hallway. The boys knew immediately to be quiet and to stand at attention. As still as they tried to stand, however, their faces couldn't hide how honored they were to be in this woman's presence. They looked upon her with awe. For this was Jane Addams, the woman, their parents had informed them, who had opened her doors to their countrymen in an otherwise inhospitable city. Miss Addams walked slowly toward them with the man beside her. As she pointed to different parts of the building, Angelo could tell that she was giving the man a tour of the Boys'

Building. It seemed that many people got tours of Hull House and that fact made him only more proud to be there.

Upon reaching the boys, she looked down at them and smiled. Angelo noticed that the man had a pen and was taking notes. She asked the boys a question, and Angelo looked at Vito. He translated for Angelo, "Che cosa fa sta oggi?" or "What are you going to do today?" Vito told them that they were going to the children's painting and pottery class.

Angelo felt very self-conscious, and even though he worried that it might be rude, his shyness caused him to look down at the floor. Then suddenly, he took a deep breath, stood tall, looked Jane Addams right in the eyes, and softly said "Aaaaallo." Vito was so surprised at Angelo's boldness that his eyes almost popped out of his head. As Jane Addams stared back, Angelo thought he might die of embarrassment.

Then a slight turn of her lips grew into a broad, warm smile. "Hello!" she exclaimed back. "What is your name?" Vito started to translate but Angelo put his hand up to stop him. Angelo recognized the word "name" and could figure out what would be the next logical question.

"Angelo. Angelo Blandino," he said smiling back.

"Well, Angelo. I am so glad to see you here. Are you in school?"

"Scuola?" Angelo responded.

"Si, scuola," Vito interjected smiling at Miss Addams.

"No," Angelo responded.

"Next Saturday, Angelo, we are starting a new English class. I will make sure there is room in it for a Signore Blandino," Miss Addams said matter-of-factly. Vito explained for Angelo, but somehow Angelo had already understood. He nodded and smiled at Miss Addams. She turned

toward her companion and they continued to walk slowly and talk, "So, as I was saying, I think that John Dewey and I do have a lot in common, even though he is using schools as his agent of change, and I am concentrating on the neighborhood and its community."

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In the children's pottery and painting class, Angelo's teacher said that today they were going to paint landscapes. He explained that a landscape painting was one in which the artist painted natural scenery. Angelo knew what natural scenery he would depict: it would be the vibrant blue sky and golden yellow grass of his homeland, the way he envisioned it from his grandfather's bedtime stories. Angelo dipped his brush into water and the opaque blue paint on the palette. Then with gentle but broad strokes, he began to paint. A sky began to appear on his paper. Angelo was focused and calm as he painted. The teacher walked amid the students asking them to explain their work. Angelo pointed to the picture and said as best he could in English, "This is home."

The teacher put his hand on Angelo's shoulder and responded with a warm smile, "It's beautiful."

After working with watercolors, Angelo carefully washed his brush, gently shook the water out of it, and laid it down to dry as his teacher had showed him. His teacher told them to stop by later so they could take their work home after it had dried. Angelo ran out into the sunshine to play. He got lost in a trance as he looked up at the clear, blue vibrant sky that had only wisps of clouds in it. Not too long before, this vacant lot had housed some rotten, old buildings. The man who owned them, however,

caught the infectious spirit of Hull House and tore down the buildings and put up swings.[5]

At lunch, Vito anxiously looked for Giuseppe and Antonio, his two new friends from school. Upon seeing them he ran toward them with a smile, started talking immediately, and sat down with them to eat. Angelo stood waiting for Vito to turn around and invite him over. But the longer he waited, the possibility seemed to grow more remote. Blushing, Angelo headed to a table where a little girl and boy sat. Angelo didn't know where they were from, but after he sat down he turned and said, "Allo." The little girl giggled and the boy smiled back, "Hello." Although the little boy and girl were not speaking Sicilian, Angelo and the little boy took turns making funny faces for the little girl, who responded to each new face with a bright, infectious giggle.

After lunch, Angelo found his way to the section of Hull House called the Labor Museum. He walked by rooms where people were giving demonstrations of traditional crafts. He stopped briefly at one room where he saw a man carving wood with a knife. Then he went on to find the textile room. Today it was his mother's turn to show how she could weave.

There were so many people in the room watching her that Angelo had to push his way through to the front of the crowd.[6] His mother acknowledged his presence with a glance but kept working. He watched her as she carefully sat on a small stool in front of a loom. With her left hand, she guided a shuttle through the warp threads until she could no longer reach through. Then her right hand grabbed it to finish pulling the shuttle through the row.[7] Angelo looked around the room. On the walls were diagrams of looms and the steps involved in making cloth. A map illuminated the different weaving techniques used in different parts of Europe. Then he saw

Vito, who had just come in the door with Giuseppe and Antonio. They angled their way through the crowd to get a better look at Angelo's mother and her work.

When Angelo's mother finished she turned toward the crowd and slightly bowed her head. She smiled shyly with a downcast look, her long lashes shielding her dark eyes. The crowd clapped and complimented her on her work. A neighbor who also came from Vallelunga said, "I had no idea you do such beautiful work!" Angelo beamed as his mother grabbed his hand. Among the compliments, Angelo distinctly heard Vito say in a boastful manner, "That's my good friend Angelo's mother. Hey, Angelo, Signora Blandino, I'm over here!" Angelo ignored Vito and squeezed his mother's hand as he led her out the door. Silently they started toward home. The sun was slowly setting behind them as they walked through the tenements. He held his painting close as he kept step with his mother's brisk walk. Angelo wasn't thinking about the newspapers that had to be sold the coming week, or of the smell that would invade their apartment that night. He was already looking forward to next Saturday; another day at Hull House.

Sources

1 Peggy Glowacki and Julia Hendry, Hull-House/Images of America (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 43.

2 Ibid., 13.

3 Ibid., 38.

4 According to "What Hull-House Really Is," Chicago Tribune, April 28, 1895, the walls of Hull House were covered with copies of classical and traditional European art.

5 Ibid.

6 Information about the Labor Museum can be found online at www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull/urbanexp/index.htm.

7 Encyclopedia Britannica website (search word "weave"): www.britannica.com/eb/article-60767/textile.