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A LIFE AT ANGELO'S

by Stephen Vincent Benét

I DON'T know why everybody keeps on going to Angelo's. The drinks aren't any better—in fact, they're a little worse, if anything—and the dinner never was much. I'm getting so I can hardly look a sardine in the eye any more.

Of course it's a quiet place, and they don't let in many college boys. It's generally just the old crowd from five o'clock on. Oh, people come and go naturally—the way they do in New York. If they didn't, I don't suppose Angelo could keep on running. But what I mean is, you can drop in almost any time after curfew and find somebody you know to have a quick one or a couple of quick ones with. And then, if that's your weakness, you can stay and get dinner; though I wish they'd try another brand of sardines.

Suppose everyone stopped coming, all at once? Or suppose the place closed? I don't like to think about that. I suppose it's bound to happen, sooner or later, when Angelo's made his pile—they always go back to Italy. Then there'll be all the trouble and bother of finding another place; and the crowd won't be the same. You can't keep a crowd together, once you move the place, in New York. It seems pretty safe, though, at the moment, I'm glad to say. There's never been any real trouble, you see; no one ever gets shot at Angelo's, and when the visiting firemen get too noisy, Rocco just eases them out. Rocco's the little one with the grin, and he doesn't look strong, but how he can ease a fellow out when it's necessary! He did it to me only once, and I've never held it against him. That was just after Evie and I had broken up.

No, I don't think there's any need to worry for a while yet. And when there is, I'm sure Angelo will tell me about it far enough ahead so I can make my arrangements. After all, I'm one of his oldest customers. I don't go back to the Twelfth Street place, the way Mr. Forman does, but seven years is a long time in this man's town. They're easing Mr. Forman out at 11:30 these days. It used to be all hours when I first knew him, but a man can't expect to drink like that at his age and not show it in the whites of the eyes. That's another thing I have against all this changing around. You get started going from one place to another and buying taxis and going in for general snake dancing; and before you know where you are you're on a party, and the whole next day is bad. Well, now, if you work at all, you can't afford to have the week days go bad on you. I'm not talking of Saturday night—there's a law about that. And of course those impromptu harvest homes are a lot of fun when you're young and new to the town. But when you've had a little sense knocked into you you're a fool if you don't run on schedule. Isn't that so?

Now, at Angelo's, you always know where you are. A couple of quick ones or so before dinner, and the red at dinner—or the white, if you're dining with a girl. Then a little touch after the coffee and a couple of long ones and a nightcap, and home at twelve by the old college clock. And all the time you're talking with somebody you know—about their wives, or their husbands, or religion, or the market, or what's new in the crowd—just rational conversation and maybe a little quiet singing, like "Work is the Curse of the Drinking Classes." Sometimes Mr. Forman sits down and tells one of his long stories, but generally he'd rather stand at the bar. And sometimes the whole crowd clicks, and sometimes it doesn't, and sometimes that Page girl gets started on her imitations.

But anyway, it's something you're used to, and you're doing it again, and it's warm, and you know the people, and you don't have to go home. And Angelo's there, getting a little fatter and sleeker every year, and with a little bigger white edge around his waistcoat. Now and then he'll set up some *strega* for you, if he's feeling right. I don't like *strega* myself, but it would hurt his feelings to refuse. And then, in summer, there's the little back garden, and the fat cat that always has kittens, and the pink shades on the lamps. Rocco will be telling you the fish is ver' fine—and you know it isn't, but who cares?—and you can sit and watch the lights in the skyscrapers and hear the roar of the town, going by outside. You don't have to think at all. It's restful that way.

I can remember when I used to think a lot. And wonder about the people who came to places like Angelo's, and who they were, and why they came, and what they did with the rest of their time. I used to make up stories about them, going back to the apartment with Evie, and we'd both get excited over them; and forget to turn off at our own corner, we were talking so hard. That was when everybody we met was brand-new and bound to be interesting, and it was fun going to shows

together in the gallery and having pancakes afterward at Childs'. I was always going to write some of those stories down, and she helped me make notes of them. I found the start of the one about Mr. Forman the other day. Well, what was the percentage in keeping it? I've seen a good deal of this writing racket since; and I ought to know what will sell and what won't. And anyhow, I'd just made him an old soak, and he's really a pretty interesting man.

Besides, that's something you get over. Wondering, I mean. Once you're on a normal schedule, you don't have time. I used to think it was funny—meeting people the way you do and having them tell you all sorts of inside things, the way it happens, and yet not really knowing them or tying them up with anything outside. But that's stopped bothering me. You just have to let them come and go, or it breaks the charm.

Going home to dinner with Jim Hewitt was what cured me, finally. I never met a fellow I liked better at Angelo's, and we told our real names. So, when he suggested breaking the family bread one evening, I took him up. Good Lord, he lived at Scarsdale and they had three children! The baby was sounding off like a police siren as we came in, and we had one round of weak orange blossoms before the fodder. Mrs. Hewitt liked orange blossoms. Then, afterward, we sat around and played three-handed bridge and Mrs. Hewitt and Jim discussed the squeak in the car. I couldn't have stayed all night; I'd have had the mimies. Jim was sort of ritzy for a while after that, but he got all right again, finally. I guess they must have hitched up the sled dogs and moved north to White Plains or something, for I haven't seen him in I don't [know](#) how long.

Of course, now and then something comes along that you have to take notice of. People get married or divorced, and Angelo will always open a bottle of champagne, no matter which it is, if they're really old customers. I remember the party the crowd of us gave to cheer up Helen Ashland when she heard about Jake's remarriage. She certainly took it like a sport—we were thinking up funny telegrams to send the bridal couple all evening. I don't believe she really had hysterics either. That was just Bing Otis' idea. And she couldn't have meant it when she said she hated us—she'd always been the life of the crowd. Anyhow, I think she got married again last year—somebody was broadcasting about it. If she ever comes back to Angelo's, I'll have to get the low-down.

That's another thing about the crowd—the way they stick together when anything happens. I'll never forget the night Ted Harrison went out. Of course, he'd been going into reverse for quite a while, and whenever he got particularly sunk, he'd talk about doing a one-way jump through a window; but we knew Ted and just kidded him along. So when he did do it, after all, it was mean. Anyhow, he had the sense not to stage his act at Angelo's.

We went to the service afterward—those of us that could. That's what I mean by all of us sticking together. It was one of those gray winter days, and cold. There was a little boy, and he was crying. I don't see why they brought him there. I didn't know Ted had a boy. I know the rest of Ted's family sort of upstaged us. But we felt we ought to be there; though it was funny how little you could remember about Ted except parties. Well, there isn't much to those services, the way I look at it. But then we went back to Angelo's and he was fine.

Evie never took to Angelo's somehow, even at first. She felt she had to like the dinner, because it was cheap, but the atmosphere of the place never really appealed to her. She liked going to places where there was music or where somebody famous might be sitting at the next table. Of course, it was generally an out-of-town buyer or a cloak model, really, but she got just as big a kick out of pretending. We used to have dinner home a lot, too, that first year. It's wonderful how much food you can get for the money, living like that. Though, of course, it's really cheaper for me to eat at Angelo's, now I'm alone.

I've thought sometimes of getting a regular maid or one of those Japs who just come in and get dinner and clear away. There'd be money enough, for Evie never would take alimony, and now she's married again she doesn't need it anyway. But then, what would you do after dinner? You can't go to the movies every night in the week, and a man who works all day needs some relaxation.

When Evie and I were married, we used to go to all sorts of places—we even went to museums on Sundays and to those concerts they have way uptown. But there's not much point in doing that sort of thing by yourself. And if you start trotting a girl around, why, anybody knows how that finishes. You may not mean to get hooked up together at all, but some little thing happens and you're in for it, one way or the other. And if it's one way, you're bound to feel like a bum sooner or later, while if it's the other—well, I've been married to Evie, and once is enough. I'm not going to repeat at my age. This

child is too wise.

Now, you can see as much of a girl as you like at Angelo's, and that's all right because you're both part of the crowd. You've got protection, if you see what I mean. And even if you should stop playing for matches, it wouldn't mean much to either of you. We're all pretty modern in the crowd and we understand about things like that. Of course, we've had some fairly wild birds at one time or another, and I don't say I agree with all the talk I hear. But there's no use being Victorian, like people were in 1910. You just have to be wise.

It's queer, though—you certainly couldn't call Evie Victorian. And yet she never genuinely fitted in with the crowd. She wasn't a gloom either, or a bluenose; she was really awfully pretty and the kind of girl that everybody likes right off. Why, Mr. Forman took a great shine to her and used to come over and sit at our table and tell her how he wished he had a daughter her age. But she just couldn't stand him. She said it was the look of his hands. Now, when anybody's been drinking for thirty semesters or so, like Mr. Forman, I think they're lucky if they have any hands at all. And if they do remind you of an alligator-skin bag, you ought to overlook it and be broad-minded. But Evie simply couldn't see it that way.

She was always wanting us to make friends with other young married people, even when they lived up by Grant's Tomb, where the climate's different. Well, that's all right, but once you go in for that sort of thing, you might as well stay in Waynesburg. That's what I kept telling her: "This is New York," I said, "this is New York." Let the Weather Bureau worry about the wide-open spaces. But all the same, after she was gone, I found a whole envelope full of real-estate ads—you know those mortgage manors with the built-in kiddie coops that all the Westchester cowboys come home to on the 5:49. Now, can you imagine that in a sensible girl?

So there it was, you see, and we didn't make a go of it. Well, it's no use crying over spilt giggle water, as they say, and a man has to take things like that in his stride. If he doesn't, he's lost in the shuffle in this man's hamlet. I can see it wasn't anybody's fault; I'm modern. Maybe if Evie had really liked the crowd—but there, I won't blame her. She's happy the way she is, I guess; and you can see the way I am. The only thing that ever hurts this little head is to think of Angelo's closing down, sardines or no sardines. But I'm sure he'll give me the eye, long enough ahead, if it does. He's always shot square with me.

Of course, occasionally you get sort of philosophic about this time in the evening, and wonder how things would have turned out if they'd been different. But I've almost quit doing that. There's no percentage in it.

I remember Mr. Forman, one of the first times Evie and I were here. She hadn't noticed his hands then, and when he got talking to us, we both thought he was a pretty quaint old character. I guess he took to us so because we both of us must have looked young and green. Anyhow, he started philosophizing. "Youth," he says. "Youth against the city; coming in every day—" Oh, he ought to have had it syndicated! "I've watched 'em come," says he, "and I've seen 'em go. And some it makes, and some it breaks, and some just dry up gradually till the whitewing sweeps 'em away. Go back to your cornfields, young people," says he—as if Waynesburg didn't have car tracks!—"Go back and raise a family of nice little mortgages, because I'm a bad old man and you're breaking my heart"—and pretty soon he's crying into his glass.

We didn't pay any attention to him. We knew we were going to lick the world. But all the same, there's something in what he said. This town is a tough spot till you get wise to it—and it's too bad to see a fine man like Mr. Forman going to pieces the way he has these last two years. But then he's got what I call too much system in his drinking. You have to have just enough so it doesn't worry you.

Take me. If I'm stepping out a little more than usual tonight, it's just because of seeing Evie again. Of course it was bound to happen sometime, the way people come to New York; but a thing like that is apt to make you a little nervous just the same. It's easier, being modern the way we are. All the same, when I stepped out of the elevator and saw her waiting where she generally used to wait . . .

She hadn't come upstairs to the office, and that was decent of her. That girl at the front desk never could see me, and it's a laugh, your ex-wife ringing you up to pass the time of day or waiting out in the reception room. Though it wouldn't have been exactly a laugh to me.

I'd thought of all sorts of things to say to her when we did meet, but I didn't say any of them. I even forgot to take off my

hat. I just said, "Hello, Evie. I didn't know you were in town," and she said, "Hello, Dick. I'm just here between trains"—and then we stared at each other.

I knew her right away, and yet I didn't know her, if you can get that. She was just as pretty as ever, but we weren't married any more. And then, her face was different. It didn't have that sort of quiet look on it when we were married. Of course, she'd let her hair grow too. She always had pretty hair. It had been five years. Well, there we were.

I must have looked like something, for, when we were out on the street she touched me on the arm.

"Don't worry, Dick," she said. "Everything's all right. I just thought, as long as I was in New York, it was silly not to see each other. Do you mind?"

"Not a bit," I said. . . . Well, you have to be polite, haven't you?

"How's Mr. Barris?" I said. . . . That's Evie's husband. It's a funny name.

"Oh, he's fine . . ." she said, "just fine."

"And the children?" I said. . . . I couldn't imagine them. "I suppose they're fine too?"

"Oh, they're fine," she said.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, Evie," I said.

I don't know why it was so hard to talk; we ought to have been used to talking to each other.

She looked at me and laughed, quite the way she used to. "We can't stand here and gape at each other, Dick," she said.

"That's right," I said, so I flagged a taxi and told him Angelo's. Then I remembered she didn't like Angelo's. But she was decent and said that it was all right.

I'll hand it to Rocco. He knew who she was, all right, but he didn't even bat an eye—just took the order. We were the only people in the little room. She said she wanted some sherry; so that was that, with a double old-fashioned for me.

When he was gone, "Was that Rocco?" she said. "He didn't remember me."

"Well," said I, "you've been away a long time."

Then we looked at each other and knew we had nothing to say. She made rings with the bottom of the sherry glass.

"Oh, Dick," she said, "it's all so different from the way I thought it would be. Tell me about yourself."

"Oh, I'm still at the old stand," I said. "Same desk, as a matter of fact. Same salary, just about."

"How about the novel?"

"Oh," I said, "I'm working at it."

But she saw through me. "It's been five years," she said.

"A good idea's worth putting time on," said I, so she gave that up. Well, I wasn't going to cry on her.

"How about yourself?" said I. "Still living in Des Moines?"

"You know Mr. Barris lives in Cleveland," she said.

"I never can keep those two towns straight," I said. I felt better now, with that old-fashioned inside me, especially as Rocco was bringing another.

"Who came from Waynesburg?" she said, trying to kid me out of it.

"Me," I said. "But you'll have to admit I've come a long way."

I don't know why that made her look as if she wanted to cry. She hardly ever did cry—that was one thing about her.

"Oh, show me the snapshots!" I said. "I know you've got them." So she did. There was the house and the children and everything, including Mr. Barris in golf pants, and the family sedan. The little girl looks like Evie. That's a break for her. I don't know what our kids would have looked like. Terrible, I suppose.

I passed the pictures back. "They're nice," I said. "It's quite a house. I suppose you've even got a garbage incinerator."

"Of course," she said. "Why?"

"It looks like a house that would have a garbage incinerator," I said. "But you'd think Barris could afford a better car now he's a family man."

"Don't talk about George," she said.

"I'm through," I said. "So you're happy, Evie?"

She looked straight at me. "I am happy," she said—and that's the hell of it; I could see she was.

"Well," I said, "skoal!"—and that was the end of that old-fashioned. I was certainly coming back to normal in grand style. I could feel it creeping all over me. Then I heard her sort of talking to herself.

"It was a mistake," she was saying. "I ought to have known, but I couldn't help it. I thought—"

"Why say that?" I said. "It's always nice to revive old times. . . . Rocco! . . . Ah, there you are, sir. And in a minute some of the crowd may blow in."

She started putting on her gloves. "I suppose they're the same too," she said.

"Who?"

"Oh, the Parsons, and that man you called the Poached Egg, and—what was her name?—Ruth something . . . and—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "You're moving too fast for me. The Parsons broke up, and they say she's up at Saranac for her lungs. I don't know whatever did happen to the Poached Egg. As for that Ruth girl—well, after Ted Harrison popped himself—"

"Ted Harrison?" she said. "Who was Ted Harrison?"

Well, there we were. We just didn't have any point of contact at all. Of course, it wasn't her fault; she'd been away, and you do get quick action in this town. But she didn't even know who Ted Harrison had been.

"Oh, well," I said, "it doesn't signify. Just wait around a little. Some people I want you to meet will be coming in pretty soon. You'll like them; they're really awfully nice people."

"I don't think I can wait, Dick," she said. "I've got to get back to the hotel. I'm taking the night train."

"Back to Cleveland?" I said.

"Back to Cleveland," she said.

"Well," I said, "if you must, you must. And I won't tell Barris on you." I felt pretty cheery by now. She looked at me. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Oh, Dick, Dick!" she said. "Whatever are you going to do with your life? You had such a lot. I can't stand it."

"If you mean my hair," I said, "it's the barber's fault, not mine."

But she didn't pay any attention. "I didn't come back to show off," she said. "Really I didn't. I hoped—I really did—I'd come back and find you—"

"Clean and sober?" said I. "Well, I'm all of that."

"I—oh, what's the use?—I even thought you might be married."

"To some nice girl?" I said. "No, thanks. I've been."

"I held on as long as I could," she said.

"I'm not denying it," said I. "Let's leave it at that. No hard feelings."

She looked as if she wanted to say a whole lot more. Then she looked around the room and at Rocco coming in with the fresh supply. I don't know what she saw to make her look like that.

"No, it wouldn't have been," she said, sort of low to herself. "It couldn't have been. Good-by, Dick, and thank you."

"The pleasure is all mine," said I. "Only sorry you won't have another. Just a second and I'll get you a taxi."

But when I'd settled the bill and got my hat and coat, she was gone.

I went back to the little room and sat down again. I didn't feel like thinking, but I couldn't help it. For one thing, Evie's asking about all those people who had been in the crowd—why, they'd just disappeared. And I hadn't even realized it. Come to think of it, the only two left of that particular crowd who still came to Angelo's were Mr. Forman and myself. And what was that novel about that I'd been going to write?

"Rocco!" I called.

"Right with you, mister."

"You have the right idea," I said, but when he came in, I made him stay.

"Rocco," I said, "tell me something. How do I look today?"

"Oh, mister look ver' fine; seem ver' well."

That's the trouble with Rocco. He's always so darn pleasant.

"Don't two-time me, Rocco," I said. "Do you remember when I first started coming here?"

"Oh, yes; remember ver' well. Mister ver' good customer; ver' steady customer. Wish we had all like mister."

"Leave that outside," I said. "Just tell me one thing: Do I look a lot different?"

He spread out his hands. "Sure, mister look little different. Why not? Time pass. Rocco look different too."

"You're a liar," I said. "You haven't changed that Dago grin in twenty years. . . . All right, I look different, but how old do I look?"

He spread out his hands again. "Rocco don't know. Mister maybe forty, forty-one—mister in his prime."

"You low snake," I said. "I'm thirty-two." This was serious.

"Thirty-two? That's right. That's what Rocco mean"—and he grinned. But I didn't feel so funny.

"Tell me, Rocco," I said. "You've always been a friend of mine. Now be a friend. Tell me honestly. Do you think I drink too much?"

Gosh, you couldn't get anywhere with him! He just kept on grinning.

"Mister ver' good customer," he said; "ver' old, ver' steady customer. Mister carry what he drink ver' well."

"I know that!" I said. I was getting mad by now. "But is it too much? Be sensible, Rocco. I don't put away half what Mr. Forman does."

"Nobody drink so much as Mr. Forman. Some day Mr. Forman go pop. Rocco ver' sorry then, for Mr. Forman old customer."

"Well, that's a swell way of encouraging me. How about yourself, Rocco? How's your health?"

"Fine; thanks, mister. We have new bambino only other day."

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that. But look here, Rocco; you take a snifter—"

"Sure. Rocco drink wine—*strega*—ver' good. But Rocco have to work. Can't drink alla time."

"I get that. But I work too."

"Sure, mister work. But Rocco work alla time. Rocco have wife, tree bambini; have to work. Work to go hack to Italy, buy *trattoria*, buy farm, have more bambini, be big man in town. That work for a man. Mister have another old-fashioned?"

He wouldn't talk any more. And the next one didn't go so well, because I'd started looking at myself in the mirror.

Oh, it just shows what a state I was in. And it shows you never ought to go back on your tracks. You know, for a while there I didn't like my face a bit.

That's why I say, modern or not, things like seeing Evie again don't do you any good. Because, when Mr. Forman came in and touched me on the shoulder, I jumped a mile. And just before I jumped I caught his face in the glass right over mine. I've apologized to him since, and I guess he's forgotten it. But they all must have thought I was crazy, running out like that and leaving the money on the table. And all that week I just got crazier and crazier, getting up and taking a cold shower in the mornings, and eating at tearooms and coming right back after dinner and hunting around to see if I could find whatever became of that novel. One good thing, I did get the room pretty well cleaned up. That woman who comes in never really cleans.

But what's the use of all that when you keep getting the fidgets? And getting the fidgets makes you think too much. Anyway, one evening it was nice and warm, and I thought, "I'll just take a walk. I can't sit here any more."

Well, I didn't have any particular direction in mind, but after a while, sure enough, there I was in front of Angelo's. Man, you should have seen the welcome they gave me. Angelo set up the drinks himself, and Rocco was grinning all over.

"Angelo think we lose our mos' steady customer," he said, "but mister come back. I know he come back."

And Mr. Forman never said a word about how I'd acted.

He wasn't a bit standoffish; in fact, Rocco had to ease him out at eleven that night.

Now, the only worry I've got is Angelo's retiring, as I say. But even if he does, maybe Rocco will keep the place on. Of course, even that would be a change, but I'd hardly mind. We've known each other a long while, and he knows I'm a good customer.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

The following change was made to the original text:

Page 172: I don't now how → I don't [know](#) how

Minor variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[The end of *A Life at Angelo's* by Stephen Vincent Benét]