



Episode 52

Make Him an Aff Case He Can't Refuse

The old man is dying.

Finally.

Most men his age would be dead twenty years ago. Most men his age don't live to be his age. He is a tough old tyrant who has survived a risky life, staving off a violent end for a hundred and one years, and even now, although the doctors insist that natural causes have caught up with him and that he won't last more than a week or two, a few people in the family still believe that he will outlive them all, and have begun shopping for presents for his hundred-and-second birthday in January.

But this time the doctors are right. The old man is dying. Finally.

Don Angelo Vitelli lives in a big house in a small neighborhood. In all those years he never wanted to leave his little corner of Port Chester, New York, where his family had immigrated in the early years of the century. At first, they had shared rooms with relatives. Then Angelo's father worked his way up to their own small house, and in his own time Angelo worked his way up to another, bigger house. But always in the old neighborhood on the south side, not far from the United Hospital where countless Vitellis had their tonsils out, their bones set, and their children born. Bullet wounds and the like were treated *sub rosa*, however; there were medicos on the payroll available for such contingencies, and the paperwork that would have otherwise ensued...
Mama mia!

Don Angelo was not the first Vitelli to ignore the legal expectations of his adoptive country, but in the beginning his rationale was to ameliorate the immigration process of his fellow Italians

who followed him over from the old country. But soon the business grew, making its first major strides during prohibition, diversifying into other vices than alcohol during the thirties and forties, hitting mega-conglomerate status in the fifties and sixties. Lately business hasn't been so good, what with new generations of immigrants from Asia and South America bringing a different style of immorality to the good old U.S. of A. "It's not like in the old days," someone in the Vitelli family is usually saying, and they are right, it's not like in the old days. But it's still not bad, as organized crime goes. A lot of the big ones were put away in the eighties and nineties, but Don Angelo survived without even an indictment.

But now the final indictment is in. Don Angelo, like all of us sooner or later, has been found guilty of living, and must pay the ultimate penalty of the death sentence.

They are gathering from far and wide to pay their last respects to the old man, to receive the touch of his living hand one more time, to say good-bye while they still can. Anyone anywhere who owes has ever owed a debt to the Vitelli family has been coming to the house, not only to see the old man but to be seen by his sons. Dominic Vitelli, who will become the padrone after his father's passing, is no slouch in the age category himself: Dominic is seventy-two years old, and for the last decade he and Don Angelo have looked more like brothers than father and son, two skinny old men waiting at heaven's -- or hell's -- gate, walking sticks held tightly in their bony hands, wisps of gray hair parted across their speckled scalps. Few people expect Don Dom to outlast Don Angelo by much, and the real power is expected to devolve on Angelo's other, much younger son by a different marriage, Proscenio Vitelli. It is to Don Proscenio to whom most people will really be paying their respects during Don Angelo's dying days.

When the Buglaronis' Lincoln turns down the Vitellis' street, there are already a dozen cars parked in front of the house. It is a cold, gray, damp day, the gutters choking with the sodden leaves brought down by yesterday's rainstorms. The three-story house is at the end of the road on a lot twice as large as any of its neighbor's. Another family has just left the house and is walking back to their car; they are dressed in black suits, as if for a funeral. Which it will be, in a few days.

Ham Senior is driving, and he pulls into the Vitelli's driveway.

"Help your grandmother," he says to his son, "and then I'll go park."

"I don't-a need no help-a," Grandma Buglaroni says.

"Help your grandmother," Ham Senior repeats, ignoring the old woman.

Ham Junior glumly opens the back door and gets out of the car, going to his grandmother's door and giving her a hand to help her out. Despite her protestations, she grabs his hand firmly and

uses his strength to draw herself out of the car. The Buglaronis are also dressed in funereal attire, the only deviation being Ham Junior's traditional two pairs of socks.

Grandma Buglaroni clutches Ham Junior's arm all the way up the stairs to the front door. Ham Senior reaches them in time to ring the bell. The door is opened by a Vitelli family functionary, who silently lets them into the house, taking their coats as they enter the living room.

The Vitelli residence is unremarkable, considering the family's remarkable occupation, and the remarkable amount of money they have earned from it. There is no special art, and no special furniture. The family members gathered in the living room to meet the guests do not appear especially privileged. Mostly they are the grandchildren of Don Angelo, themselves the age of Ham Senior. Ham Junior is the youngest person in the room.

The proceedings are like any wake or funeral, except the guest of honor is still alive. The older Buglaronis exchange pleasantries with the Vitellis, leaving Ham Junior to gaze around the room, vainly searching for something interesting. After ten minutes, one of Don Dom's daughters stands and offers to take the Buglaroni's to see Don Angelo. "Only for a minute," she insists.

He is a hundred-and-one years old with about a week to live. Ham Junior feels that a minute's visit ought to be more than enough.

The three Buglaronis follow the woman out of the room and up a central staircase to the second floor. They walk quietly down the corridor to a set of double doors. The woman knocks softly, and without waiting for a reply, opens one of the doors and motions the Buglaronis to enter. They do, and she closes the door behind them.

The sick room has a king-sized bed in the center, with a tiny wisp of a man bundled up in the middle of it, his skeletal head propped high on the pillows. He is wearing a sleeping cap, which gives him a quirky, Dickensian appearance. He seems to be awake, but he offers no recognition of his visitors.

At his side is Don Domenic. A little old man himself, Don Dom is at least conscious, and he acknowledges the Buglaronis with a slight nod. Ham Senior whispers the words, "Don Dom," then Grandma Buglaroni pulls away from Ham Junior and strides up to the bedside of the cadaverous padrone.

"Don Angelo," she says loudly.

The old man turns his head toward the sound and painfully turns his eyes toward her. A sound comes from his throat like a steam radiator that has just been turned on.

"Thank-a you, Don Angelo, for-a my life," the old woman goes on. "And thank-a you 'specially for-a young Hammy."

She reaches behind her and grabs Ham Junior's arm, pulling the startled teenager up closer to her, almost tumbling him on the bed in the process.

"Bless-a him, Don Angelo,"

The barely open eyes try to focus on Ham Junior, but nothing seems to penetrate the cataracts that blur his vision. The old man makes that radiator noise again, and slowly lifts his right hand. Grandma Buglaroni sweeps down and lifts the hand, and touches it to her grandson's chest.

"Thank-a you, Don Angelo. Thank-a you."

The door to the room opens, and the woman who led them up reappears to escort them back down. Grandma Buglaroni reluctantly lets go of Don Angelo's hand, which falls back on the bed like shot pheasant. Ham Senior mutters another "Don Dom" to the other old man as the family is ushered out of the room.

"Would you like to see Don Proscenio?" the woman asks.

Ham Senior nods. "Oh, yes," he says.

The woman leads them down the stairs and around to the rear of the house.

"Don Proscenio is going to be the real power," Ham Senior whispers to his son. "Except for his... problem."

"Problem?" Ham Junior says loudly.

"Shhh!" Ham Senior gives Ham Junior a look that has stilled many Buglaroni moments, and they continue along their way.

The woman takes them to another door, and Ham Junior recognizes a familiar smell as she opens the door for them.

Chlorine?

The Buglaronis walk through the doorway. Where the old man's room was as quiet as his soon-to-be tomb, this place is positively raucous. It is an enormous indoor swimming pool. A dozen Vitelli family functionaries are scattered around the sides, drinking beers, smoking, some of them playing cards, all of them enjoying themselves. The pool is empty except for one person near the

center. The newspapers refer to him as "Proscenio (the Whale) Vitelli," and now Ham Junior knows why.

Don Proscenio is not fat. Fat does not do him justice. Fat does not begin to describe him. Don Proscenio is to fat as chocolate is to dessert, as Siamese is to cat, as Princess Diana is to supermarket tabloid. Don Proscenio defines fat: he is the essence of fat. If there were no fat, there would be no Don Proscenio.

Which is why he is in the swimming pool. His approximate quarter of a ton is made livable by keeping it buoyant. Although he can walk, he cannot walk far, and the usual extent of his constitutional is from the pool to his specially designed bathroom or his specially designed bedroom. And of course the pool area is also specially designed with all the comforts of home, including stereo and television and the other essential paraphernalia to make life passably enjoyable. Don Proscenio keeps the room stocked with a full-time contingent of his myrmidons, to attend to his every whim. And also, rumor has it, he runs his crime network from this watery domain, but no one has yet been able to prove it in a court of law. Only one thing is certain, and that is that Don Proscenio has the most wrinkled, pruny skin that Ham Junior has ever seen.

"Ham!" Don Proscenio calls out to Ham Senior. "Good to see you."

Ham Senior goes up to the edge of the pool. "I was just up with your father," he says.

Don Proscenio is wearing only bathing trunks. He is not a pretty sight as he tsk-tsks and shakes his head. "He's not going to last much longer."

"He's lasted a hell of a lot longer than most of us. He's had a good life."

"That he has, Ham. That he has."

Proscenio ("the Whale") Vitelli turns to the rest of the Buglaronis.

"Hello, Maria," he says to Grandma. "You're looking well."

"You too, Don Proscenio."

"You're an old flatterer, Maria." He gives Ham Junior the once over. "And you must be Ham's son."

"Ham Junior," the old lady says, pulling her grandson closer to the edge of the pool.

"Ham Junior." Don Proscenio splashes a little closer in their direction. "How old are you, Ham?"

"Thirteen." Ham Junior's voice is tremulous.

"You do good in school?"

"Like, okay."

"Just okay? That doesn't sound good to me. What do you like about school? You play sports? You play football like your father?"

Ham Junior shakes his head desultorily, but then a smile breaks on his face. "I like to debate," he says. "I won my first trophy yesterday."

Don Proscenio returns the smile. "You hear that, guys," he says, drawing his confidantes into the conversation. "Ham Junior here just won a debate trophy."

There's a wave of encouraging acknowledgment from the peanut gallery of Don Proscenio's myrmidons.

"That's the way to be," Don Proscenio continues. "Be smart. Make something out of yourself. Be a debater. I wish I had been a debater in my day. Maybe I'd be more than just a bum now. You do well, you understand me?"

Ham Junior nods. "Yes, sir."

"You need anything, you come to me, you understand. I like smart boys." He turns back to Ham Senior. "You've got a good son, Ham. Congratulations."

Ham Senior beams proudly. He does not often beam over his son's accomplishments. With good reason.

The door opens behind them, and again the woman of the moment appears to take the Buglaronis in tow. She leads them to the main foyer, and obviously their visit has come to an end.

"Thank you for coming," she says as the man who originally let them into the house appears with their overcoats.

With some final shaking of hands, and the brushing of a cheek or two, the Buglaronis are out the door and heading back to their car, Grandma once again clinging to Ham Junior's arm.

"That was, like, unbelievable," Ham Junior is saying.

"What?" his grandmother asks.

"He was like the fattest thing I've ever seen. He was, like, you know, they'll have him on Oprah kind of fat. Holy cannoli..."

They get back into the Lincoln and pull away, heading back to Nighten Township. When the old man dies they'll have to go through the formalities all over again, but that will be more pro forma than this visit. This was the visit where the points were made, insuring the continued success of the Buglaroni family in any venture they undertake.

Maybe even debate.

Will the old don live to see the next episode of Nostrum?

Will Proscenio ("the whale") Vitelli ever get the chlorine smell out of his hair?

Will Grandma Buglaroni always talk with "-a" at the end of every word?

Will the mafia start supporting forensics if there's no dead bodies involved?

Is there any night of the year where there isn't poker on at least one station?

We don't know, and we won't tell in our next episode: "Godfather 4: The Sequel that Beggars to Be Made, or Marlon ("the whale") Brando isn't wearing tee shirts anymore."