A High School Education Is

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VITO Amanzio ascended the ladder, balancing half a dozen cans on a thin arm, thinking. Two rungs up he stopped and stacked the cans on the shelf.

"Hey, Vito. You bedda go lock da fron' door. It about time to close." Vito's father emerged from behind the meat counter in the back of the shop, wearing a white apron covered with brownish-red stains. He stepped into the aisle and pulled the string leading to a bare light bulb.

"All right, Papa." Vito descended and shoved the half-emptied crate of cans out of the aisle as his dark eyes adjusted to the dim light that filtered in between the red letters on the front window. "Joseph Amanzio—Best Groceries in South Chicago," the letters said, and in smaller print, "Italian Food Our Specialty." Vito twisted the key in the front door. He stepped over to the window with the red letters and turned the "OPEN" sign to the "CLOSED" side to tell customers that Joseph Amanzio had closed for the day. Beneath his father's name in the window, Vito saw, as he had every night for a year, the words "And Son" in red hand-painted letters. Papa had put them there almost a year ago, after he told Vito that it was time for him to stop going to school and help with the shop.

"Come, Vito. Mama, she be waiting." Vito saw the dark form of his father waiting at the back door.

"Papa?" Vito hesitated. "Papa, I got talk to you."

"We talk on way home." Joseph Amanzio started out the door.

"Papa, I wan' go back school!" Vito blurted the words. "When new term start, I wan' go back."

"Ah, Vito. I need you in shop now. What for you wan' more school? You got tan years now."
“Papa, we lucky. People outside, they not lucky. I got to help our people. I got to learn.”


“Papa, you help. You give dem food an’ you tell dem, ‘You pay me when you got da money. Joe Amanzio, he trust you.’ But dey owe you.” Joseph Amanzio pulled up his collar to fend off the sleet. He trudged through the slush in the alley toward the street that went to his home. Vito followed. “You help now, Papa, bud I wan’ teach dem how nod to owe. I teach dem to help demsel.”

Joseph Amanzio and his son walked past the boarded shop windows to the corner of 133rd. An old Italian, his feet wrapped in dirty gray rags, sat on a stoop at the corner. He looked up as they approached. “You give few cents for smoke?” he asked, begging with his eyes. Joseph Amanzio dug in his jacket pocket, pulled out a few copper coins and shoved them into the old man’s outstretched palm. He clambered to his feet and hobbled away.

“You see? I help dem an’ I no haf read to do it.” They crossed the street. Two blocks north of where Vito and his father turned, a bread line stood outside a Salvation Army building.

“You see dem?” Vito asked. “You know why dey are in line?”

“Dey are hungry, dey no come to Joe Amanzio,” his father answered. “I would help dem.”

“Papa, you no can help dem all. Dey haf to help themselves. Dey haf be showed how.” Joseph Amanzio walked on in silence. “Papa, you don’ need me at shop all day.”

They turned into the alley that went to their back door. Two ragged children, gleaning the garbage from the can at the steps, turned and ran as the man and the boy approached. “Garbage,” muttered Joseph Amanzio. “Dey should know bedda.”
"Dey should, bud why don' dey?" Vito caught up with his father. "Dey need be taught. Papa, I come help you after school each day if . . ." Vito watched his father go in the back door. He followed.

"Where you two bean?" Mama chuckled. "Super, it ready an hour ago." She stood in the kitchen with an apron around her stout waist.

"Mama, you know whad Vito wan' now?" Joseph Amanzio asked his wife. "He wan' leave me at shop an' go school. He need to learn."

"Oh, Vito, you no need go school. You got everyt'ing here you need." Mama laughed as she spoke. Vito ignored her.

"Papa? You say I don' need it, but you don' say no."

Joseph Amanzio sat down at the table. "Papa, you don' say no, so can I? I still help you, Papa, but can I?"

"Ah, son we do OK at shop. Times, dey get bedda for da people, too. Den you forget dis idea. You don' need school, I need you at shop."

"Papa?" Vito implored, fighting the lump rising in his throat. "Do you say no?"

"I say no. Now eat wit' me an' Mama."

It was too final. Vito turned and walked slowly from the room.

"Joseph, should I . . .?"

"No, Mama, he be all right." Joseph Amanzio wrapped spaghetti onto his fork.

Vito lay on his bed, his eyes red, dry, staring at nothing. For a long moment he did not move. Then he turned on his side and reached under the bed. He brought something into the dim light. The street lamp outside the window sent in a soft glow, and he opened the book he had brought out and read, half aloud, from a worn page: "A high school education is becoming necessa. . . ."

Vito Amanzio turned to the wall and covered his face with a pillow.