

from

PAPA WAS AN AMERICAN

by LEO F. BUSCAGLIA

AS I ENTERED JUNIOR HIGH, Papa and Mama, whom I had loved without question, suddenly became an embarrassment. Why couldn't they be like other parents? Why didn't they speak without accents? Why couldn't I take peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches in my school lunches, rather than calamari? (Yuck, the other kids said, he eats squid legs!) There seemed no escape from the painful stigma I felt in being Italian, the son of Tulio and Rosa. "Buscaglia"—even my name became a source of distress.

One day, as I left school, I found myself surrounded by a group of boys. "Dirty dago!" they shouted. "Your mom's a garlic licker. . . . Go back where you came from!"

It seemed an eternity before I was released from the circle of pushes, punches, and taunts. I wasn't really certain what the epithets meant, but I felt their sting. Humiliated and in tears, I broke free and dashed home. I locked myself in the bathroom, but I couldn't stop the tears. What had happened seemed so wrong, yet I felt helpless to do anything about it.

Papa knocked on the door. "What's the matter?" he asked. "What is it?"

I unlatched the door, and he took me in his arms. Then he sat on the edge of the bathtub with me. "Now tell," he said.

When I finished the story, I waited. I guess I expected Papa to immediately set off in search of the bullies or at least find their parents and demand retribution. But Papa didn't move.

"I see," he said quietly. "They finally found you. Those cowards who don't know us but hate us all the same. I know they hurt you, but what they did wasn't meant just for you. It could have been anyone who is different."

"I hate being Italian!" I confessed angrily. "I wish I could be *anything* else!"

Papa held me firmly now, and his voice had an edge of anger. "Never let me hear you say that again! Italians make beautiful music, paint wonderful pictures, write great books, and build beautiful buildings. How can you not be proud to be an Italian? And you're extra lucky, because you're an American too."

"But I don't want to be different!" I objected. "I'd rather be like everyone else."

"Well, you're not like everyone else. God never intended us all to be the same. And would you want to be like the boys who hurt you?"

"No."

"Then wipe your tears and be proud of who you are. You can be sure it won't be the last time you'll meet such people. Feel sorry for them, but don't be afraid of them. We've got to be strong."

He dried my tears. "Now," he said, "let's get some bread and butter and go eat in the garden."