

Poppa and the Spruce Tree

by Mario M. Cuomo

In this essay Mario Cuomo, former governor of New York, recalls an experience with his father that serves as an inspiration to him. It was first published in the Diaries of Mario M. Cuomo.

Poppa taught me a lot about life, especially its hard times. I remembered one of his lessons one night when I was ready to quit a political campaign I was losing and wrote about it in my diary:

Tired, feeling the many months of struggle, I went up to the den to make some notes. I was looking for a pencil, rummaging through papers in the back of my desk drawer, where things accumulate for years, when I turned up one of Poppa's old business cards, the ones we made up for him, that he was so proud of: *Andrea Cuomo, Italian-American Groceries—Fine Imported Products*. Poppa never had occasion to give anyone a calling card, but he loved having them.

I couldn't help wondering what Poppa would have said if I told him I was tired or discouraged. Then I thought about how he dealt with hard circumstances. A thousand pictures flashed through my mind, but one scene came sharply into view.

We had just moved to Holliswood, New York, from our apartment behind the store. We had our own house for the first time; it had some land around it, even trees. One, in particular, was a great blue spruce that must have been 40 feet tall.

Less than a week after we moved in, there was a terrible storm. We came home from the store that night to find the spruce pulled almost totally from the ground and flung forward, its mighty nose bent in the asphalt of the street. My brother Frankie and I could climb poles all day; we were great at fire escapes; we could scale fences with barbed wire—but we knew nothing about trees. When we saw our spruce, defeated, its cheek on the canvas,¹ our hearts sank. But not Poppa's.

Maybe he was five feet six if his heels were not worn. Maybe he weighed 155 pounds if he had a good meal. Maybe he could see a block away if his glasses were clean. But he was stronger than Frankie and me and Marie and Mamma all together.

¹ **cheek on the canvas:** a boxing term used to describe physical defeat

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We stood in the street looking down at the tree. The rain was falling. Then he announced, “O.K., we gonna push ’im up!” “What are you talking about, Poppa? The roots are out of the ground!” “Shut up, we gonna push ’im up, he’s gonna grow again.” We didn’t know what to say to him. You couldn’t say no to him. So we followed him into the house and we got what rope there was and we tied the rope around the tip of the tree that lay in the asphalt, and he stood up by the house, with me pulling on the rope and Frankie in the street in the rain, helping to push up the great blue spruce. In no time at all, we had it standing up straight again!

With the rain still falling, Poppa dug away at the place where the roots were, making a muddy hole wider and wider as the tree sank lower and lower toward security. Then we shoveled mud over the roots and moved boulders to the base to keep the tree in place. Poppa drove stakes in the ground, tied rope from the trunk to the stakes, and maybe two hours later looked at the spruce, the crippled spruce made straight by ropes, and said, “Don’t worry, he’s gonna grow again . . .”

I looked at the card and wanted to cry. If you were to drive past that house today, you would see the great, straight blue spruce, maybe 65 feet tall, pointing straight up to the heavens, pretending it never had its nose in the asphalt.

I put Poppa’s card back in the drawer, closed it with a vengeance. I couldn’t wait to get back into the campaign.



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