The Joy Of Growing Up Italian

Part 4

He had achieved his goal in coming to America and to Rhode Island and knew his children and their children were achieving the same goals that were available to them in this great country because they were Americans. When my grandfather died years ago at the age of 76, things began to change... Slowly at first. Then uncles and aunts eventually began to cut down on their visits. Family gatherings were fewer and something seemed to be missing, although when we did get together, usually at my mother's house now, I always had the feeling he was there somehow. It was understandable, of course; everyone now had families of their own and grandchildren of their own. Today they visit once or twice a year. Today, we meet at weddings and wakes.

Lots of other things have changed, too. The old house my grandfather bought is now covered with aluminum siding, although my uncle still lives there, and of course my grandfather's garden is gone. The last of the homemade wine has long since been drunk and nobody covers the fig trees in the fall anymore. For a while we would make the rounds on the holidays visiting family. Now we occasionally visit the cemetery. A lot of them are there, grandparents, uncles, aunts, even my own father.

The holidays have changed, too. The great quantity of food we once consumed without any ill effects is no good for us anymore. Too much starch, too much cholesterol, too many calories. And nobody bothers to bake anymore – too busy – and it's easier to buy it now and too much is no good for you. We meet at my house now, at least my family does, but it's not the same.

The difference between US and THEM is not so easily defined anymore, and I guess that's good. My grandparents were Italian Italians. My parents were Italian Americans. I'm an American Italian, and my children are American Americans. Oh, I'm an American all right and proud of it. Just as my grandfather would want me to be. We are all Americans now – the Irish, Germans, Poles, and Jews. U.S. citizens all – but somehow I still feel a little bit Italian. Call it culture, call it tradition, call it roots. I'm not really sure what it is. All I do know is that my children have been cheated out of a wonderful piece of their heritage.

They never knew my grandfather.