The Joy Of Growing Up Italian

Part 3

There was another difference between US and THEM. We had gardens, not just flower gardens, but huge gardens where we grew tomatoes, tomatoes, and more tomatoes. We ate them, cooked them, jarred them. Of course, we also grew peppers, basil, lettuce and squash. Everybody had a grapevine and a fig tree, and in the fall everyone made homemade wine, lots of it. Of course, those gardens thrived so because we also had something else it seemed our American friends didn't seem to have. We had a grandfather.

It's not that they didn't have grandfathers; it's just that they didn't live in the same house, or on the same block. They visited their grandfathers. We ate with ours, and God forbid we didn't see him at least once a day. I can still remember my grandfather telling me how he came to America as a young man "on the boat". How the family lived in a rented tenement and took in boarders in order to make ends meet, how he decided he didn't want his children, five sons and two daughters, to grow up in that environment. All of this, of course, in his own version of Italian/English, which I soon learned to understand quite well.

So, when he saved enough, and I could never figure out how, he bought a house. That house served as the family headquarters for the next 40 years. I remember how he hated to leave, would rather sit on the back porch and watch his garden grow, and when he did leave for some special occasion, had to return as quickly as possible. After all, "Nobody's watching the house." I also remember the holiday when all the relatives would gather at my grandfather's house and there'd be tables full of food and homemade wine and music. Women in the kitchen, men in the living room, and kids, kids everywhere. I must have half a million

cousins, first and second, and some who aren't even related, but what did that matter? And my grandfather, his pipe in his mouth and his fine moustache trimmed, would sit in the middle of it all surveying his domain, proud of his family and how well his children had done. One was a cop, one a fireman, one had his trade, and of course there was always the rogue. And the girls, they had all married well and had fine husbands and healthy children and everyone knew respect.