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## Ties That Bind: The Threads of My Family Fabric

### **My Family Attributes**

I am from a family that takes deep pride in the roots from which we come and the people we can somehow connect our ancestry to. Every member is not just a circle or square on the family pedigree but a figure of value in the lives of each and every other person. All of us can somehow trace ourselves back to Italy, and despite half of us having never lived or even visited there, we take strong pride in being Italian, it bringing comfort and connection to many of our lives. My grandmother, or as I call her, my 'Nonna', was born in rural Italy to two purely Italian parents who moved to the United States along with most of her family at the end of World War II. They settled in Youngstown, Ohio and built a life in the United States from the ground up. After moving to the states, my Grandmother (as many immigrants are) was pressured to assimilate to American culture and lost the influences of Italian culture in her life. Through this project, I hope to learn about my family tree and the intricacies of how I am connected to the people I am related to, particularly through the interview process. I intend to explore the history of my Grandmother's home village of Bugnara and the culture of rural Italy. I believe that researching the place she came from can help me connect further with my ancestry.

## Picturing My Family



This photo was taken at an annual Christmas gathering my family hosts each year a few days before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, there are many close family and friends at my cousin's house where the main Christmas party is held, so a few years ago we began meeting up for a separate, more intimate gathering where we can all enjoy each other's company better. Featured in this photo are my mom, dad, sister, grandma (Nonna), grandpa, aunt, uncle, and my three cousins on my dad's side. The reason this photo is so significant to me is because this is the party I look forward to most during the holiday season. We have a tradition of making Italian wedding soup and charcuterie boards, and we open gifts together later that night. Additionally, my cousins always spend the night at our house and we spend hours after their parents have left going light looking, drinking hot chocolate and singing Christmas songs. It is the one day I spend the whole year looking forward to, and is always a day I know I will miss when it is over. I always feel so much love and joy and fear the day we all grow up, move on, and this gathering won't happen anymore.

## **The Echoes of My Childhood**

I am from pancakes and hot chocolate,

from early morning cartoons and late bedtime stories.

I am from muggy summer nights that stuck to my skin like molasses,

neighborhood kids yelling and ice cream truck melodies.

I am from games of pretend,

of airplanes and beaches and lost orphans.

I am from large Christmas gatherings and hugs from people I barely knew,

from rigatoni with meatballs and blueberry donuts.

I am from pillow forts and hushed giggles beneath low strung blankets

propped up on chairs and couches.

I'm from large piles of books and magic lands traveled to in the recesses of my days.

I'm from hot summer trips to Siesta Key Beach and Disney World,

autographs from princesses and magic castles that seemed taller and grander then than they do

now.

I am from a close family,

a culture of its own,

my lineage a concoction of different ancestries, one distinct set of customs and traditions lost in the confusion of time and assimilation.

I'm from two oddly wired, chemically imbalanced brains,  
from stress and impulses and tears and medication.

I am from loneliness and exhaustion, sorrow and control  
My reflection in mirrors and storefront windows my enemy,  
silent sobs and overthinking my friend.

But I am also from love and people who care,  
From good morals and life lessons.

I am from sacrifices made and promises kept.  
From joy, compassion, and hope.

Intricate mosaics narrate my life, a swirl of colors crafted with fragmented yet beautiful shards of different glass.

I gaze upon this mosaic with pride.

I am proud of the people who raised me.

I am proud of where I'm from.

Proud of the happy memories, hard experiences, and steps taken in the journey that has led me to who I am now.

### **Source Analyses**

In *Leaving Little Italy*, Author Fred L. Gardaphé discusses Italian culture in America and how it has morphed into what it is today. He addresses how the experience for Italians immigrating to the United States affected their culture and subsequently future generations. Gardaphé states, “Just as the immigrant was, for the most part, alienated from the main-stream economy—forced as most new immigrants are to take the work given to them or to make work for themselves—the second generation, the children of immigrants, became social immigrants searching for acceptance in the larger society...Not until the third generation, then, can we see any mass movement into the cultural mainstream. The irony here is that to be successful culturally, they would have to accept or return to what their parents had to reject” (Gardaphé 5). By American society pressuring immigrants to abandon the culture of their home country and assimilate to a more ‘American’ way of life, many individuals lost the connections they had to their homelands. As a result, these people were unable or chose not to pass on their traditions and customs to the following generations. This is a common experience among immigrants, and one lived all too well by my family. When I conducted my interview, my Nonna was the last living relative to be born in Italy. While other family members grew up among direct immigrants and were relatively immersed in Italian culture, they were born in the United States and strongly influenced by the local culture. Everyone has forgotten or never learned the language, recipes have been lost, and traditions are rarely remembered. While I empathize with the desire to fit in and feel a sense of belonging, I selfishly wish that the culture and customs my ancestors once had could have been cherished and passed to my generation. Recent culture shifts in the U.S. have legitimized and validated not only the inclination to cherish the traditions that stem from one's ancestry, but the need to. It can be difficult to feel unanchored to my Italian heritage and culture when I yearn so deeply to fully understand it.

In *Social Support Systems in Rural Italy*, author Giovanni Gregorini explores how small communities in rural Italy maintained strong social structure and connections particularly through charity work, reflecting a sense of togetherness and shared responsibility. He finds common themes among these small villages, giving insights into Italian ways of life. Gregorini states, “In the early modern period the phenomenon of assistance to the needy came to be increasingly framed by and incorporated into the workings of the parish...Regular clerical congregations...displayed a marked propensity for practical action to aid the needy, always accompanied by prayer and preaching. Practices of social solidarity-such as distributing alms, caring for the sick, educating poor children... people without families, beggars, and other disadvantaged categories- became hallmarks of many new orders” (278). In most regions of rural Italy, villages were small and condensed, hosting low populations and minimal infrastructure. However, almost every town hosted at least one church, and villages were centered around the activities that were carried out by it. The churches would work to assist struggling demographics, and because most members of the village were part of the church, this meant that a large majority of the people in the village were uniting together to help others. This common dynamic helped cultivate communities in rural Italy that worked to assist one another through hardship and suffering. In my interview with my grandmother, she noted that in her village, she lived with many family members, and that everyone was related one way or another. This knowledge of my family history, synthesized with the points made by Gregorini, perfectly encapsulates why my relatives' and my own view on family is the way it is. Because everyone in her village was family one way or another, this further strengthened the commonly established Italian ideals of assistance to others in your community, as those in need of help were not just co-habitants, but blood relatives. By continuing this belief after moving to the United States, my

grandmother and her family cultivated new generations that see family as people you help and serve, not as a choice, but as an obligation.

I have always wondered why second cousins once or twice removed have come to be as close to me as a sister, or why great great aunts send me loving birthday cards every year despite rarely seeing them. Even more odd to me, some people that I have been told I am related to are so far removed from my immediate family, we call them 'paisons', translating roughly to a cousin without relation. But because of the situations in which my grandmother and generations before her were raised, even if someone is a distant cousin or someone you see only once a year, family is seen as the very backbone of life and loyalty to it is imperative.

### **Interview Transcript**

Note: My grandmother is quite the rambler and would start making other points unrelated to the question I had just asked, however it was good information to put down nonetheless and her side points were beneficial to the interview. This isn't the most perfect or cohesive interview but I think it was very insightful.

Ava: What did your life look like growing up there? (Bugnara, Italy)

Nonna: I do remember, when we went back in 71' I was able to locate the various places I went to and visited as a child. It is very small, one grocery store, two churches, and you mingle with everyone else - you know everyone there and are connected with them all. The church was the center of social life. You didn't travel much, there was only one school and I went to second

grade and it only goes up to 5 grades - you would have to go to a bigger town if you wanted to continue your education. Everyone was related one way or another.

Ava: How did WWII affect your town and family?

Nonna: When I was a kid during the war I would hide in the broom closet because I was afraid of the Germans - they lived in our house and my parents thought I was taken. The captain that stayed at our house was very nice but they would round up the men and send them to Germany. There were bombings and it was a warzone - it was scary. We were lucky we were treated well.

Ava: What was your family's motivation(s) for leaving Italy?

Nonna: There were multiple reasons. I think my dad worked so hard that he felt he could do better to come here for me to give me a better life. Second, my mom missed her sisters terribly, so for that reason also. A lot of the family had moved here already. It was a big step. He left with nothing and to start all over in your thirties is rough. He never regretted it. I would tell him to go back to Italy to sell his house but he would always say "my home is here"

Ava: Who all in your family immigrated to the U.S.? Who came first and how long did it take for everyone to complete the immigration process?

Nonna: My aunts Lousie and Loretta came to the U.S. first, and my mom missed them and that's when they decided to move here. My dad and I waited in line, but my mom was a naturalized

citizen because her father was born in the U.S. so she came first to be with her sisters; my dad and I came shortly after. We came here with a debt from the passage and it's amazing what my father did. He worked two jobs - he worked in the mill where most of the men worked and he worked part time at a dry cleaners as he was a tailor by profession. My dad was very bright. His family wanted him to be a doctor but he had so many responsibilities. What he did was become a tailor but we had farmland so he was also a farmer - he did a lot of different things.

Ava: Do you remember anything from your journey to the U.S.? Do you recall any emotions, worries, or thoughts you had?

Nonna: I remember the Gibraltar near Portugal and Spain - we were second class on the ship and my uncle came with us, my dad and me. On the boat we met two sisters who were traveling to New York to meet their parents and they were pretty wealthy - they took a liking to me. One night I stayed with them and all one of them could do was scream that the ship was sinking and it was filling up with water. I think that was one reason I never learned to swim. As far as emotions go, saying goodbye is hard for me even now. I had friends, other family...yeah goodbyes are really hard for me.

Ava: What was the hardest adjustment to life in America?

Nonna: It was very difficult for me to learn the language but I was good with numbers; and I had good teachers who recognized my talents - I was put in first grade when I was nine but the teachers were wonderful and I thought of becoming a teacher because of the experience I had.

The kids were good - my neighbors would come and get me to go to school - I wanted to go home to Italy and I was homesick so that was hard too.

Ava: Did you live in an Italian community?

Nonna: No - we ended up living in a rental community that we shared with aunt Lousie and uncle Gino. We were pretty integrated into regular communities. We were the first family with TV so all the other family members would come over and we would gather together and watch the television.

Ava: Did you or your family members try to hold on to Italian cultures and traditions as best as you can? What ways did you continue that culture?

Nonna: I see stories about Italians that only stick with their culture, but I don't think we did that. We wanted to be exposed to America. I think we were able to assimilate our traditions with what was going on here. My dad couldn't wait to get his papers and studied for his citizenship test. We had to wait our turn and we did it legally. There is a way to come in and you have to wait your turn.

Ava: Did you feel certain pressures to assimilate into American culture?

Nonna: I just couldn't adjust to it. It was different. I had banana curls and didn't want to wear winter clothes. My parents were in tune to me and my needs though. You always feel like you

don't fit in - but the people were nice looking back. Some of the girls in my class would pick me up and help me with words. Math was my savior because it was universal. You have to be good at something to be happy. My parents didn't sit back and not become American. There were three brothers but my dad was the worker and supported the whole family. It was a better life here and we came with nothing. We only carried a chest with us. We left our home behind and didn't sell it, letting his nieces and nephews stay there.

### **Conclusion**

While I lack a strong understanding of Italian culture, the one thing I know for certain is that we love our family fiercely, and I have had the privilege of growing up in an environment where I know without a doubt that I am cared for because of the ways I have seen the people who love me care for others. I know that family can be more than just the people we share blood with, but because of the loving environment I have been raised in, my biological family has been more than sufficient in supplementing a stable, happy, and nurturing environment. For that I am forever blessed.

## Works Cited

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