A Little Taste of Everything

On the cold and windy morning of Dec. 11 2005, my mother, Ellen, took her last breath. It no longer mattered that she came from an Irish family and my father, Jim, from an Italian one. It no longer mattered that when they first started dating my mother accused my father of lying to her about the traditional Italian Sunday dinner. “You’re telling me that you spend all day eating…with your family? What’s her name?” my mother asked in a rage. Now these differences became insignificant, even comical.

As both my father’s and mother’s families filled the hallway outside of my mother’s hospice room it became apparent through silence that both families had become now one. My short and tough Sicilian grandmother, Sue, wobbled her way over to my father with her hands reaching for his face as she broke the silence and said, “A mother should never have to bury a daughter.” The words carried the weight of freight trains and by the looks on the faces of my aunts, uncles and cousins it made a direct hit.

A few days later at my mother’s funeral, as my sister and I walked away from the grave we both watched as Sue bent down and reached past the snow on the cold ground. After a while searching she nodded and seemed pleased with herself for selecting such a nice rock, which she placed where the headstone of my mother’s grave now sits. Noticing our puzzled looks my grandmother laughed and said, “It’s a Jewish tradition to place a rock on the grave stone.” “But
we’re not even close to Jewish grandma,” my sister said with a smile. Thinking for a moment
Sue looks up and smiles as she said, “Life’s short, might as well get a little taste of everything.”

Both Sue and Vito, my grandfather on my father’s side, were born and raised on Staten
Island, New York to Italian families. My grandfather asked my grandmother out on a date when
they were roughly 4 years old, however she turned him down. The heartbreak did not occur
because of my grandmother; it was his own mother’s fault He was forbidden to date a girl whose
parents were from Sicily, the southern region of Italy. Being from the north of Italy, my
grandfather’s parents looked down upon Sicilians as, “not real Italians,” according to my father.

Meanwhile both grew up in households that forbade the use of the Italian language. “I
only know it because I was used as a translator for my mother,” said my grandmother. “But if I
used Italian any other time there was hell to pay,” she laughed and explained that she was
terrified of the threat of the “wooden spoon.” A tactic she later adopted in order to strike fear into
her own children by simply holding up a wooden cooking spoon, but never actually making
contact with anything.

Vito became an all-city track runner, started a fraternity in college and enlisted with the
Navy during World War II. Needless to say, he was not the type to let cultural differences play a
role in his life, and neither would his future wife.

My father was born and raised, just like his parents, in New York. He never wore a
necklace with the Italian horn, never learned how to speak Italian, never stepped foot on Italian
soil and pretty much defied anything his parents told him anyway. The assimilation into
American society seemed complete for the Pavias.
On the day my father went to meet my mother’s parents for the first time he was stopped before he could put his Dock Martin boots on. “What’s this girl’s name?” Vito asked. “Ellen Greene,” replied my father, “Why do you ask?” Vito sat down and a small sarcastic smile appeared from ear to ear. “If her father’s name is Jim, you better watch yourself.”

“What does that button say?” my grandmother Helen asked my father on the day she met him. “Sex, drugs and rock and roll,” my father said smugly. “That’s…” my grandmother paused to look at my grandfather Jim, “nice,” she said with a manufactured smile. They didn’t have a problem with him because he was Italian -- they didn’t like him because he was a punk rocker. However, years later my grandfather Jim wore that same pin.

Jim Greene, my mother’s father, was a smooth-talking, independent, and loving individual who just so happened to be as tough as nails. When I was 9 my grandfather sat me down and explained to me that when he was my age he wore a ring on his index finger that featured a smiling face. “You wouldn’t be smiling when I hit you with it though,” he said with a cackle that could be heard for blocks. The face’s large smile carried with it an air of dramatic irony because that very smile was raised above the surface of the ring and was razor sharp.

Growing up in Hell’s Kitchen, a former Irish ghetto in New York City, wasn’t easy or fun my grandfather explained but it’s the only place that his Irish immigrant family could live.

“My father was a mean man,” my grandfather said as his tone changes with each word, “worked his ass off. And one day after work, one of my sisters came home with a black eye, my father got his wrench and beat the hell out of somebody that day.” My grandfather’s eyes were now peering back into the past and he had left our conversation.
In an attempt to escape a life working on the docks like his father, Jim Greene signed up with the United States Army, using his brother’s name in order to enlist a full year early. He spent 22 years as a carrier soldier dragging his family all over the country. My mother was the lucky one, however. She was born and raised on Staten Island, New York and actually maintained some stability as her father took a job working security with Chase Manhattan bank where he met co-worker Vito Pavia.

Jim and Helen Greene, both born and raised in New York City were of Irish heritage. They made it a point that every St. Patrick’s Day they would make chicken parmigiana, meatballs, and spaghetti. On the other hand my Italian grandparents would make corn beef and cabbage, showing off their assimilation.

The Greenes weren’t making Italian food to prove anything. It was simply that “Corn beef and cabbage is not food,” according to my Irish grandfather. “It’s disgusting.”

It seems that these two families had two important things in common, their lack of ties to their respective “old countries” and their strong ties to New York City. The identities slowly changed from Irish and Italian to simply New Yorker. This was the intention of my great grandparents which came into fruition when I was born.

Growing up on Staten Island, hanging out with friends in Manhattan, spray painting graffiti in Brooklyn, and working in the Bronx, I proudly refer to myself as New Yorker before all other identities.
After my mother, a graphic artist, died I felt the best way to pay tribute to someone with her personality was a half sleeve of tattoos in honor of her life. The first two decisions were an angel and a piece of art she had done of her own hand during chemo therapy.

“I’m thinking about a Celtic knot for my arm,” I said to my father in order to gage his reaction. “Why the fuck would you do that?” he asked with his face in a mix of puzzlement and anger. “Because she was Irish, man,” I explained. “I’ll be honest with you. Your mother thought all that shit was stupid,” he said. I agreed, with a laugh, not to put something my mother didn’t care about on my arm for the rest of my life.

One day as the wind chimes in the cemetery danced and sang I made my way toward my mother’s headstone. On it was engraved a saying that she had printed out and placed on her mirror so she was reminded of it every day she was alive. “Never, never, never give up,” a quote made famous by Winston Churchill. At this moment I could hear my mother’s voice, her Staten Island accent mispronouncing every other word, screaming at me to get these five words tattooed on my arm.

As I walked toward my car, I began to laugh to myself at the incredible irony that my entire family had overlooked became clear. Here lies a woman of Irish descent who lived her life and will forever lie underneath words made famous by the former leader of England, the historical enemy of the Irish people. “A little taste of everything,” my grandmother’s words came back to me. I went back to find a stone to put on top of my mother’s headstone.

Around six months after my mother died my father began dating a woman named Diane. My dad was very reluctant to inform my sister and me that he had begun a romantic relationship. But my sister and I were happy for him.
The following weekend, Diane walked into our house with eyes wide open and fear evident on her open face “Relax and come sit down,” said my 12-year-old sister, who was already a dangerous judge of character.

Diane made her way toward the couch where she sat down and smiled. “So where are you from?” I asked.

“Me,” Diane said thinking over an answer that should’ve been more of a reflex, “I’m from Jersey.”

With a smile on my face I thought back to how my grandfather Vito’s family looked down upon my grandmother Sue because she was from a different area of Italy. I couldn’t comprehend how these families looked at each other so differently and yet they were from the same country. Now, however, I was faced with exactly that and the moment of silence after Diane’s response to my question made that evident. I was looking down on her because she was from New Jersey and not from New York.

“Don’t worry about the Jersey thing,” she said with a slight chuckle and continued, “I’m a New York Rangers fan.”

A little taste of everything.