



## Even the Eat'n Park waitress had to laugh when her mom was on a roll

Fran Tunno recalls her Italian American mother, who said, 'Iffa you love a me, you'll eat!'

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A book has been percolating in me since I was 18 years old. Back then I thought, Hmmm, I was given this firecracker of a mom for a reason. I wonder what it is.

I wasn't thinking book, or much of anything, back in the 1960s and '70s. I was full of blissful ignorance, focused on having fun, what junk I'd eat, what outfit I'd wear and boys.

One thing I was certain of was that my Italian American mother was unlike any of my friends' moms. Mary Tunno had a thick accent, was loud, large, funny, and didn't back down from anyone. She made me laugh and ... embarrassed me terribly.

When friends visited, she sat them at the dining room table, asked them lots of questions and shoved plates of salami, cheese and bread in front of them. Then she watched to see how much they ate. The amount you ate determined how much you liked her. Even her grandchildren heard, "Iffa you love a me, you'll eat!"

When she wasn't force-feeding guests, she was busy entering every available contest (legal or otherwise), cooking, canning, baking, chasing me and my siblings with a serving spoon, treating her light-up Jesus like her personal therapist, curing illnesses with spiked tea and other questionable remedies, never missing an episode of "The Price Is Right" — and reminding us daily we were the best.

The maturity to truly appreciate her didn't come until my mid-20s. What was embarrassing in my teen years became pretty funny then. I started writing at 30 and made sure I included details for the kids I kept putting off having. I was afraid my kids would never get to know my mom, because she never met a salami she didn't love and because she was always saying, "Wenna you gonna have a kids, when Imma dead?"

Thank God my brothers had children, so she was temporarily appeased.

Then Mom had the nerve to actually pass away when the son I finally delivered was 5 months old. I remember thinking: *I'll never laugh again.*

It's my memories of her that now bring a smile to my face. I think back to times when I almost slipped back into being embarrassed, but caught myself and realized every moment with my mom was a precious gift, like one lunch at Eat'n Park.

After dutifully majoring in elementary education in college to please my parents, I learned there was a glut of teachers. I also found out that educators in Western Pennsylvania didn't make enough to live on in 1977.

Then I discovered (after student teaching) that I hungered to be out in the world, not stuck in a classroom. That led me to take a job as a sales representative because it offered freedom, a company car and a \$12,000 starting salary (which was good in 1977) plus bonuses.

It also forced me to spend my days trying to make Listerine, Listermint, Efferdent, Effergrip, Schick razor blades and Sinutabs sound exciting. My territory included my hometown of New Brighton, so after a soul-numbing morning of sales, I knew taking Mom to lunch would be a good diversion.

Within two minutes of my arrival, she was ready to go with purse in hand and a huge smile on her face. We drove to Eat'n Park in Beaver Falls and sat in a comfortable booth. Mom read the menu very closely, trying to decide whether to get breakfast or lunch. The waitress came by and asked if we were ready. Mom had a few questions but seemed ready, so I ordered my usual salad and my mother began:

Mom: "Honey, can a you please a tell a me what's inna dissa salad?"

Waitress: " Well, that's our chef salad with meat and cheese."

Mom: "You ting it's a good?"

Waitress: "Yeah, it's good!"

Mom: "Tell a me, honey, what you ting is a good here?"

Waitress: "Well, it depends on what you like."

Mom: "How do dey make a da fish?"

Waitress: "Well, they can fry it or broil it."

Mom: "Is itta pretty fresh?"

Waitress: "Yeah, it's fresh."

Mom: "And a, honey, what a kinda meat is inna da chef salad?"

Waitress: "Well, there's ham, plus eggs and cheese in it."

Mom: "How about a you suggest a for a me, honey, 'cause I don'd a know what's a good. (She turns to me) Frenzy, you ting a I should get a breakfast or lunch?"

Me: “I think you’ll like the breakfast.”

Mom: “Yeah, I ting a breakfast sounds a pretty good.... OK, honey, I wanna two eggs — how you say it, Frenzy?”

Me: “Over e—”

Mom (interrupting): “So you can a deep da bread in dem! And I’ll take a da ham, bacon and a sausage.”

Waitress: “Well, you can only get one — ham, bacon or sausage.”

Mom: “Oh, you mean I canna only pick a one?”

Waitress: “Yeah, I’m sorry.”

Mom: “OK, den a honey, I ting I’ll a take a da bacon. And a honey, make a sure da potatoes are crunchy — dats a da way I like a dem. Honey, can I have another cup a coffee? Dissa one really hitta da spot.”

OK, I know, I said once I hit my mid-20s I had more appreciation for my mom, and didn’t get embarrassed by her anymore. But I could feel myself slipping. I just prayed she wouldn’t take out her partial plate and use the prongs to pick at her remaining teeth right there in the restaurant. She was famous for that.

Then I looked at her across the table. She smiled and said, “Honey, dis is a so nice datta you’re taking a me out to lunch. I wish a we could a do it all a da time.”

How could I do anything but love this woman, partial plate and all? I’d wasted all those years being embarrassed by her when I should have been enjoying her. The waitress even got a kick out of her and we all ended up laughing.

Mom was helping me trudge up the hill to maturity. So, instead of trying to correct and change her, I reminded myself to keep smiling and remember her classic lines. I knew they’d come in handy one day.

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