

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

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A Profusion of Dark-Eyed Daughters

I THOUGHT THE MOVE TO BOSTON would be the start of my “real” life; real jobs, real marriage, real bills. I was excited to explore a new region, could picture myself attending readings at the Harvard Book Store on weekends with new literary-minded pals. I looked forward to amicably shoveling snow with my husband, a New England native who assured me—a native of Pennsylvania— that it was loads of fun to live through Boston winters. Most of all, though, I was excited to live in a town where I was not related to most of the people in it.

My mom has 52 first cousins. Her mother was one of five children, her dad one of eleven. They all settled in the suburbs of Philadelphia and got down to the business of producing a profusion of petit, dark-eyed daughters. Sure, some sons snuck in there, but for some reason, it was mostly daughters. There is a fairly good chance that people in the suburbs of Havertown or Drexel Hill PA between the ages of 35 and 55 went to school with someone who looked like my mother, and therefore, who also looked like me. Having endured this resemblance for my entire childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, by 2012 I was ready for a change. I was tired of having everything from mild misconducts to potential dates thwarted by my excessive number of family members.

In the summer of 2007, I attended Accepted Candidates Day at the University I would be attending in the fall. My mom came with me. We were meandering around the activity tables. Current students advertised activities we newcomers would want to join come Fall. My mom paused to chat with the students running the Campus Ministry organization, and I stopped to introduce myself to some girls in an a cappella group. While I was there, I met Dan. Dan, towering above me—which is not hard to do since I am five feet tall—told me he was going to be a freshman in the Fall as well. He asked if I would have lunch with him. I told him I would, but that my mom was also at the event and would be joining us. He said that was fine; his parents were there too, and had already gone inside to get a table. So in we went, my mom, myself, and my new friend Dan, who was asking me what kind of music I liked and did I maybe want to go see one of those free concerts in the local park some time?

My mom made a sudden bee-line towards one of the tables. The woman already seated there got up and rush over to hug her. Dan stopped walking. “Your mom...knows my mom?” he said.

I shrugged. “Looks that way.”

We joined the adults at the table and the women turned to us. “Julie,” my mom said, “I want you to meet my cousin Karen! She moved to Jersey a few years ago; I don’t think she’s seen you since your First Holy Communion!”

Dan and I did not go see any concerts in the park that summer.

As life progressed, my mom and her cousins dutifully married and began their own families, holding true to the tradition of producing packs of small Italian women. I am the oldest of four, and, in keeping with the tra-

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dition, three of the four are girls. I am several years older than my sisters, but that hasn't stopped us from bearing a frightfully close resemblance to each other. All three of us stand at exactly five feet tall, and, as we have been told on multiple occasions, "have the same hair, eyebrows, smiles, and chins."

The summer before my freshman year of High School, my family moved into a new parish. While it was still only a handful of miles from our old house, it was far enough away that my siblings were then enrolled in a different parochial grade school than the one I had attended. My sisters (respectively) starred on the track team and in the school play and (both, one year apart) were elected president of the student council. They spoke at many school functions, and people from the parish knew their faces. Or thought they did.

Since I did not go to the school, many people in our new neighborhood didn't realize there were actually three Morro sisters. I was a myth at best. One day, I drove to the grade school to pick my brother up from basketball practice. As I climbed out of my mother's mini-van, another parent in the parking lot stopped and stared at me. A deep frown creased her face, and she strutted over.

"Danielle, now I know your mom is busy at home, but she really shouldn't be sending a non-licensed driver to pick up Robert. Tell her I'll take him home from now on."

At this juncture, I had to explain that I was in fact not twelve year old Danielle, but Julie, Danielle's seventeen year old sister.

There are more instances I could include. Men my mom or her cousins dated in the 70s have stared me down in the grocery store and announced "you look just like this girl I almost married." Once, I was caught skipping church to buy an ice cream because someone in line behind me was a distant cousin who promptly called my mother. I have been late for classes or job interviews on numerous occasions because I have run into a relative or someone who knows one in the parking lot. I felt as though I was constantly exposed; there is no anonymity in a town where even people who are strangers to you know who you are. It is exhausting.

When I got married in 2012, our wedding was filled to bursting with these relatives. My husband tried his best to keep all the names and faces straight, a herculean task. My mom's cousins pressed my hands and told me I'd be missed while we were in Boston. As though it was inevitable that we'd come back, and fairly soon. That grated on me. Why was it impossible for me to live somewhere else, have my own identity? Why did they all assume I'd ever want to return after experiencing the blissful anonymity of Boston?

We moved to Boston on November 22nd, days after our honeymoon ended. I dropped my husband off at work and went to get my Massachusetts drivers' license. No one at the RMV gave me a second glance. Went food shopping to stock our new kitchen. No one identified me as the sibling or relative of a classmate. Went to the gym, the library, took walks around a local lake. Not a single lingering stare. Everyone left me alone.

Everyone left me alone. I started my grad school program; it was full

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of writers. Writers equate talking to strangers with painful dental surgery. I got a job at the local independent bookstore. People in bookstores don't feel like chatting; they want to browse in silence. My husband worked long hours. His parents lived an hour from us, his siblings were away at school in other states, and his cousins—all three of them—also lived a good distance away.

I was anonymous alright.

One snowy morning in early December, I was in the process of receiving some new books from Baker & Taylor, silently stewing in my own self-pity. Why had I come to this place? How long would we have to stay here? It was so cold in the store that I was wearing gloves and my coat. I had just about convinced myself that this had all been a terrible mistake when I felt a familiar prickle on the back of my neck. I looked up to find a woman in her mid-forties examining my face.

I didn't even wait for her to ask; the words bolted out: "My maiden name is Morro," I said, "and my mom's maiden name was Giangiulio."

The woman was thrilled. She ran to the Dunkin' Donuts next door, came back with two coffees, and proceeded to tell me the about the Giangiulio cousins when they were all in school together. "I remember your mom had a great singing voice, sang Mr. Boe Jangles at the talent show. And a bunch of the other ones sang with her...I could never tell them all apart." I almost cried.

It has now been nearly three years since the move to Boston. We make a lot of trips back to Pennsylvania; with this many relatives, there is a monumental event approximately every five minutes. We do our best to be present at the most pressing birthdays, weddings, graduations, and baby showers. At all of these events, my hand gets pressed and everyone asks when we are coming home. "I'm not sure yet," I tell them, "but we will."