

The Man in the Photo

By Gloria Barone



My cousin, Will, dusts off my mother's wedding portrait among the other framed photos of our mothers and aunts – all dead now.

I know my father isn't the groom in the wedding photograph. Yet for five decades, my aunts dipped into my mother's wedding album like a candy jar, each time trying to sweeten the story about who my father was by saying the man in the photo was my dad. To be clear, there was Pete, the Brooklyn taxi cab driver, who married my mother and who gave me his name even though I wasn't his child. And then there was Marco, the Brooklyn mobster, the man my mother left Pete for, and who fathered me. But that's not the point.

The point is that I know the groom in the wedding picture is not the father I said I wanted to live with when I was six years old, my comment enraging my mother so much that she dangled me out of a New Yorker Hotel window until I said I didn't mean it. That was 54 years ago, when the New Yorker Hotel windows still opened. My mother and I were hiding out at the hotel as we often did when Marco's anger and gambling debts peaked.

Around my seventh birthday, my mother and I moved back in with Marco, after he made a promise to lose his temper less and stay home more. That was a good day. Marco let me play my favorite game, "giddy-up, giddy-up, giddy-up, whoa!" With me climbing on his back and he bucking and snorting like a rodeo horse. After the game, we

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feasted on birthday cake and orange soda. My father grinned at me while I blew out my candles.

Two days later Marco vanished.

My mother and I took a taxi to Red Hook in Brooklyn to find out what happened. The Gallo-Profaci war was on, and my father was part of the Larry and Joey Gallo mob. I sat alone at a table in an Italian restaurant while my mother huddled with Mafia wives who advised her not to look for Marco.

My mother told me my father wasn't coming home, and that we should tell people he died of a heart attack. Soon after, my second grade teacher noticed my handwriting had changed. My formerly big, loopy, girly letters were cramped and twisted, each one strangling the next. Parent-teacher conferences were held, followed by my being sent to Green Chimneys in Brewster, a camp for emotionally disturbed children. I learned to ride a horse there, but I never mastered the art of making a bed with hospital corners. I cried until my mother brought me home. My mother was having emotional problems of her own, seeing my father's face outside the window, hearing his voice when she picked up the phone, turning over teacups to check for spare change. When my cat, Shadow, went for a walk and never came back, my mother was convinced the mob got him, too.

My mother found a job and we moved to New Jersey. We became known simply as the widow whose husband had died of a heart attack, and her fatherless daughter. In the years that followed,

my mother sometimes referenced Marco and Pete. Bits and pieces were leaked slowly: Marco, the mobster, was my father and presumed dead, and I was named after Pete, the groom in the wedding photos with my mother.

It wasn't until my last aunt died that I summoned the nerve to ask Will what he knew about Marco. He overheard his parents say my father was a bagman, and that he collected money for Mafia bosses. I was relieved to hear that my father wasn't a hit man, although we can never know for sure what he did to get himself killed. Our guess is that he stole money.

I take a look at the picture, for the thousandth time. The photo shows more than the bride and groom – there's also my mother surrounded by her four sisters – thick as thieves. I see in this photo the coven that protected me from a twisted secret. When I stare at the picture, I see myself reflected in their faces. We were all guilty of hiding the truth from each other. My aunts did it for love. I did it for loyalty. I don't know if we were wrong or right. I only know that we were family.

Editor's Note: Gloria Barone is a writer from New Jersey and we thank her for her story. You too can submit your true-life Italian American story to get published in PRIMO by mailing your manuscript with your name and address to Truby Chiavie-lo, Editor, PRIMO Magazine, 2125 Observatory Place, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007 or by email: editor@flprimo.com