

Spring 2006

## My Pearls Are Italian

Dodi Dolendi  
*College of DuPage*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

---

### Recommended Citation

Dolendi, Dodi (2006) "My Pearls Are Italian," *ESSAI*: Vol. 4, Article 16.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol4/iss1/16>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact [koteles@cod.edu](mailto:koteles@cod.edu).

## My Pearls Are Italian

by Dodi Dolendi

(English 2253)

The Assignment: Write a 1500-word, creative nonfiction memoir essay in which you integrate: the description of a significant photo you appear in, a significant period in your life, one quote from a source important to your essay, and section headings.

**A**mong the many joys of a family wedding, the day offers the perfect backdrop for family portraits. The bride and groom become the centerpiece for generations to gather around, subjects of a rather peculiar amalgamation of union and re-union. Romantic notions imbue hearts like the bride's fragrant flowers permeate the air. Somehow, this new love magically sweeps scattered families back together and momentarily removes old debris that separated them. Collectively, all wonder where the time has gone, how these babies grew up so fast, so unnoticed, and are getting married.

I wonder why we had to stand in line for almost half an hour, behind all the other relatives who wanted their formal portraits taken. Was there no preferential treatment for the groom, his grandfather, father, godfather and entire immediate family? Apparently not. The photographer was very busy. He had the difficult job of covering up any dysfunction, dissention, or disappointment and eliciting big smiles to hide sadness, sickness, or stress. No wonder we had to wait so long. But we stood and we waited – who knew when the next wedding or, God forbid, funeral would have us all dressed up and gathered together again?

With us, his composition captures the essence of my husband's unusually small, but hugely proud, close-knit Italian family. The stereotypical male dominance of the Italian culture is depicted, as black and white as the tuxedos worn by the three generations of handsome Dolendi men. They undeniably look related to each other and their mob of southern Italian cousins from Calabria and Naples (or as they would say: Calbrese and Napolitano goombata). They get such a kick out of using their private corruption of Italian slang as though they are fluent in their native tongue—though not one of them is. I know they do it to keep the “merighans”—Americans, like me—in the dark. But you hang around them long enough and you pick up on the language and its nuances. Over time, I realized that *goombata*, the plural of *goombah*, only obscurely means “cousin”; it's more like “old friend,” “accomplice,” or “godfather” with a subtle implication of unquestioning loyalty: a term used only in reference to men. I haven't figured out if a feminine equivalent exists. Anyway, the three women in the picture add a sprinkling of grace to the catholic mass. Only for their women will these tough guys reveal their soft, romantic, passionate hearts. For this special occasion, they gave their internal bodyguards the night off, took a break from their macho external world, stayed close to us, and smiled. If we were blown up to poster size, we'd be a picture perfect fit, squeezed dead center between the Corleones and the Sopranos, who are, incidentally, no relation; they're Sicilian.

### Names Are All Relative

Regions of Italy are not the only indicators of relation. Names are an excellent indicator as well, and the Dolendi's have a ritual of passing down names from generation to generation that suggests some strange absence of other names to choose from. The result: mafia-style nicknames they think put an end to the confusion. I think they actually lend to the confusion and serve as another way to keep us non-Italians in the dark.

At the core of the family is the proud Papa. Born Louis Lawrence Dolendi, “Larry” to some, “Louie” to others, he is the younger of two sons from his father, Ralph Frank Dolendi, who also was the younger of his father’s two sons. Seated to the patriarch’s left, the older of his two sons—the father of the groom *and* best man—Ralph Frank Dolendi, II, or “Ralphie Boy,” obviously named after his paternal grandfather. At the opposite side and seated at his father’s right hand, the baby, my husband and godfather of the groom, “Larry Boy,” named Lawrence Edward Dolendi, taking the middle name of his father and first name of his maternal grandfather. The groom, David Michael Dolendi, stands center stage behind his grandpa; he is the older of Ralph’s two sons. God only knows where the hell his name came from; it doesn’t even require a nickname, but he’s brought great honor to the Dolendi name as the first college graduate. We get bragging rights, now that he dons B.S., M.S., J.D. after his name, and free legal advice from the family *consigliere*. The youngest Dolendi male, little brother of the groom, Ralph Frank Dolendi, III, affectionately called “Little Ralphie,” is named after his father and great grandfather. As always, he is nestled between his Daddy and Papa. The tall guy, ushering in the back row, right behind his Uncle, is Larry’s and my oldest son, Lawrence Louis Dolendi, AKA Little Larry, Larry Boy Boy, Little Larry Louie Boy and to his Dad only: Guido—don’t ask. He bears the first names of his father and paternal grandfather. Bookending his brother is our youngest son, Nicholas Eugene Dolendi, who always, loyally stands behind his Dad, dutifully stands beside me and wishes his Godfather, Uncle Ralph, would move closer. Nicky and his name were both unplanned. We chose Nicholas the moment he was born because he just didn’t look like the Sara we had expected. We chose Eugene, after his maternal grandfather. I know, the genealogy gets as complicated as Biblical lineage, yet it shares one simple Godly likeness: a plenitude of boys to father the ancestral continuum.

I remember when I was pregnant with our first son. My husband’s paternal grandmother, Suzie, God rest her soul, told me, in half English, half Italian: “Hey! You a listen a to me, I a know my Larry Boy; he no have a no girls in a him. So don’t a make a too many bambino, or you a end up with the base-a ball-a team.” We believed her and stopped after two boys.

The Dolendi kingdom would not be complete without its beautiful Italian Princess, Deanna. She is the firstborn child of Ralph II and the only girl with a birthright to the family name. She stands proudly next to her brother the groom, lovingly behind her little brother and father, and attendant to her new sister-in-law, Shannon. The bride is radiant, smiling while holding the man of her dreams. I am smiling too, but only on the outside. Inside, I long for the woman who stood by me twenty-six years earlier, the day I said “I do” want to be Mrs. Dolendi. I don’t feel ready to stand in her place. I’m not old enough, not wise enough to care for her pearls.

The eye of the camera doesn’t see through our smiles to our collective grief for the one missing from our picture. She was “Oh Sar” to her husband, “Ma” to her boys, “Mimi” to her grandchildren, and not just mother-in-law, but “Mom” to me. Sara Jane Dolendi was the loving, strong, faithful matriarch of the family. She would have died to see this day, and fought the boys any day to be in a picture like this one.

### **Follow the Hitman**

The Italian Boys Club of America, Dolendi chapter, has two rites of passage: Dolendi blood and a public display of macho chauvinistic behavior. My father-in-law, reputed boss of the fraternal disorder, a true leader, displays exemplary bad behavior in an initiation ritual designed to regularly test the loyalty of the brotherhood and my patience. The guys all understand the unspoken rules and traditions of their elite society: follow them and you’re *in*, break them and... God only knows what would happen. I don’t think anyone has ever dared to break this stupid tradition; it happens every time we gather for a family portrait.

As we swarm around my mother-in-law, Sara, their little organized crime game begins. A low

drone of “Where’s Dad?” buzzes through the air. He stays out of sight long enough for his frat boys to start laughing and mocking their mother and grandmother by yelling: “Oh Lar, c’mon,” in falsetto voices. Sara slaps the arm of whoever is standing next to her really hard—I think she wants them all to feel it. Over time, I notice that they take turns standing next to her. In support of my mother-in-law, I slap my husband just because he’s laughing, and he grabs his arm like I’ve hurt him – what a faker – and says: “Hey, what did I do?” But I refuse to respond to Mr. Innocent, who knows perfectly well what he’s doing. I hate his macho Italian act that surfaces when “the boys” are around. I love the man who cried when our youngest son announced he was moving to an apartment in the city, unable to imagine our house without his baby in it. I love the man who took our heartbroken oldest son out of town the day his wedding was supposed to take place to try to ease our son’s pain. I love the man who gave me a strand of pearls for our twenty-fifth anniversary so I no longer would cry about not getting my mother’s. I often wish he would integrate his public and private lives so the world would know the Larry Dolendi I fell in love with and married.

Sara finally hollers to her husband, “C’mon Lar, what the hell?” He apparently suffers from the same personality disorder as my husband. He runs into the room like he is beckoning her call. He stops abruptly and throws up his right hand like *il duce*, to halt everything; he shakes his head in disapproval, like he’s the artist behind the camera who can’t stand to see the imperfection before him. His shots are deliberate; he aims straight for the heart when he says: “Hold it awhile. Only *real* Dolendi’s in this picture.” Bang! Sara and I are eliminated.

Sara fires back at our hitman: “Oh shut up, Lar.” She smiles and winks at me, grabs my arm, and says: “C’mon honey, the hell with them.” She sounds mad, but she’s not; I want to cry, but I don’t; my eyes plead for my husband to say something to his father, but he can’t; so we all surrender.

My surrendering would have been much easier if I had read author Iris Krasnow’s *New York Times* best selling non-fiction book, *Surrendering to Marriage: Husband, Wives, and Other Imperfections*. I would have understood that even the best marriages aren’t easy. She writes: “In marriage, no matter how deep the love and devotion, our partner is still The Other, someone we may think we know very, very well, but who is always somewhat of a stranger. We share neither blood nor genes, perhaps not even common interests. Yet we met and married and share a home, in-laws, and children. It can be hell.”

So why tolerate hell? Because there might be something holy in what God brings together. Just like sand enters the oyster, these irritants entered my life. While we co-exist, an incredible transformation occurs inside. From them, I have learned about loyalty and I have also learned not to waste time with disloyalty, can’t help gaining that wisdom from this mob. I have learned to embrace my own Polish heritage as I watched them honor and celebrate theirs. I have learned about the world of pain that pride and prejudice and tolerance and intolerance can cause. I have discovered the intrinsic value we all share as God’s creation. String it all together and I’ll bet I can’t find a more precious treasure. I love my pearls.

### **Betcha My Pearls**

I shouldn’t be betting; it reminds me that our wedding day was like a bookie’s dream. Our reception resembled an off track betting parlor where hundreds of dollars were being wagered by our family and friends—against us. They said at best we were long shots; we’d never make it past the first year. Of course, everyone had their connections that made them privy to inside information. Hot tips like: She’s not Italian; he’ll come to his senses. She’s not Catholic; she’ll come to her senses. She doesn’t know how to cook; he’ll starve. She’s really skinny; the kids will starve. She’s Polish, oh, fuggedaboutit—they’ll never make it. It was a sure bet; all the chips were stacked against us. Rumor had it even Vegas was giving odds.

Evidently, Larry liked playing the odds. According to my sister, he gambled his heart away

the day she showed him my picture. The story I was told was that as he stared at the photograph, he smiled dreamily. “Don’t get any ideas,” she said. “You’re just not her type, Lar.” “Not her type?” he challenged. “I’ll bet you ten dollars and a steak dinner (that was a lot in 1975) that I can make your sister fall for this poor Italian boy.” And so our relationship began on a bet.

He hardly appeared poor when he drove up in his red corvette the night we met, but there was no mistaking from his Roman nose to his Prada covered toes: he was classic Italian. I watched him kiss and hug his way through the room and couldn’t decide whether I loved or hated the arrogant aura that seemed to encapsulate him. He knew everyone and everyone knew him. He was like a magnet and I felt the attraction. He took his sweet time getting over to our table. Who *was* this guy? Who did he think he was? A celebrity? As we talked and laughed, his arrogance faded. I liked that. He was handsome and funny, charming and easygoing, but he flip-flopped between shy with me and overly confident with friends. I wondered which one was the “real” Larry Dolendi.

He seemed as nervous as a schoolboy when he took my hand in his and asked me to dance. My heart was pounding. I felt his eyes on me. Should I look at him? An internal voice chanted: don’t, don’t. Just then, as if he heard, he drew me closer. There was no gap between us. Now *his* heart was pounding. I still felt his eyes on me. I finally looked up. He smiled dreamily, just like my sister said, and his black olive eyes revealed the boy who bet his heart on me.

I would never have bet that the next day I would call him at work. I never called a boy; no girls called boys; my mother had a few names for girls who called boys. But I called, like I had no ability to resist. We talked and laughed for awhile and Larry said: “I gotta go back to work. I’m glad you called me. I can’t believe you called me. No girl ever called me. You listened to me talk, heard where I worked, looked up the number and called me. I’ll call you later.”

He did call later that evening and asked me out. While racing a guy in a souped up Nova, at a hundred miles per hour down the expressway, just because the guy revved his engine in the tollbooth, Larry asked a very strange question: “What do you think about my car?” The leather I was gripping on the door seemed okay. “Could you please slow down?” I asked. Larry told me much later that he knew at that moment he wanted to marry me. “You loved me for me. All I ever wanted was someone who would love me for me.”

That’s all I ever wanted too. Larry asked my Dad for my hand in marriage and even borrowed money from several of his cousins to buy my engagement ring. I had to listen to his cousins all joke about owning a piece of the rock. But soon, I forgot all that. Larry had another gift for me: an engagement present besides the ring. He sat down at his piano in his parents’ living room, asked me to sit next to him, and played the Errol Garner classic, *Misty*, my favorite song. It became our song, the one we danced to at our wedding.

### Forget Christmas

We were at my office Christmas Party, and our song was being played on the piano. “Aw, did you request this honey? It’s our song,” I announced to my co-workers. “No, I didn’t,” he said. He boldly proclaimed that he *hated* the song. “It’s *her* song,” he said, “not *our* song.” My mouth hung open. What was he saying? Why had he learned it and played it for me? I wondered, after eighteen years, if I really ever knew him at all. My eyes filled with tears, my heart with questions. Who *was* this guy? Who did he think he was? Why did he hate our song? Surely, he was having one of his macho moments that I despise, publicly withholding his love, hiding from the rest of the world the tender, loving, romantic guy that I know. Nope. In the car, he confessed he really hated the song. I cried for days.

### A Walk in Paradise

Life went on even though we were songless. We had our two boys and after twenty years of marriage, we built our “dream house.” For Mother’s Day, as a gift, the boys planted a tree in our front yard and were busy cooking *their* favorite dinner for me. Larry was setting the table when he announced that he had a gift for me too. He walked over to the stereo. “I feel so bad that I took ‘our song’ away, but I found a new one,” he said. “If I were a songwriter and could write a song for you, for us, this would be it.” He pressed play, and we danced right there in the kitchen as Dennis DeYoung and *Styx* sang. Our hearts were pounding like they did when we first danced, but I didn’t hesitate to look into his eyes. We cried and laughed and held each other close as we listened to the refrain:

*Paradise is any place where I can be with you  
Leave behind, the heartaches and the pain that I’ve been through  
Safe in your arms, Safe in the world tonight  
You are my Paradise.*

Our paradise had a cost. Larry paid each time his father eliminated me from a family picture. He never said a word, but in his silence, Larry acknowledged that he knowingly had shattered his father’s dreams: the dream that his one hundred percent pureblooded Italian baby boy would marry a nice Catholic, Italian girl with a wealthy father from the proper region of Italy. The dream that he would have one hundred percent pureblooded Italian grandchildren to bounce on his knee. The dream that a particular bloodline or church affiliation would somehow make his son more Italian or more Christian or more like him. Larry had shattered those dreams because they were not his dreams. To follow his dreams meant a lifetime with his heart divided between his love for me and his love for his family. He had overthrown his father just like Pluto, the Roman god of the underworld, had overthrown his, for love. Now I can see why Larry had never stood up to his father at family picture time, he had already stood up to him the day he chose to make his paradise with me.

I paid too, each time they pointed out our differences. I was criticized for everything: my nationality; my faith; my child raising techniques; my cooking, or lack of it—you name it; they didn’t like it. But I tolerated it all, forgave it all, even loved them all, and finally claimed them all because from them, I received my paradise.

### I Almost Died

Sara didn’t live long enough to *finally* see one of her grandchildren get married, enjoy smothering her newlyweds with millions of her “killer kisses,” or bug the hell out of them for a great grandchild, but I try to fill in where I can. I gave David and Shannon a Bible for a gift, just like she had given to Larry and me on our wedding day. I sat with my father in-law at the rehearsal dinner so that he would not feel so alone. And I found myself saying “this wedding must have cost a fortune,” just like Sara would have said. Her presence was evident all day but I needed her right by my side when my father in-law announced: “Only *real* Dolendi’s in this picture.” She was there. I almost died when I felt her nudge me as I yelled: “The hell with that, Lar, I *am* a *real* Dolendi, and I want a picture with *my* family. I heard her whisper her famous benediction “God Bless, God Bless,” as I stepped in and claimed my place in our family. I am the one with the pearls.