Across US Sullen Teens Dump Family for Olive Garden

by Con Chapman

FRAMINGHAM, Mass. It's Thursday night at the Olive Garden restaurant here, and as the line snakes up to the hostess station, Emily Nilson is offering some helpful but pointed criticism of her daughter, Alicia. "You need to pluck your eyebrows," she says. "That zit on your forehead just won't go away, will it, sweetie?" she adds as she brushes her daughter's bangs downward.

"Mother--please!" Alicia seethes through clenched teeth, then folds her arms across her chest to express in body language that she doesn't want to talk about beauty right now.

The Nilson's table is ready, and after they are seated, veteran bread-and-water man Tony DiFillipo appears to fill the glasses and drop off some rolls. "Hey, Princess," he says to Alicia. "How's my little beauty queen?"

"Your momma--she's got a poker up her butt. Stay with us!"

"Hi, Tony," Alicia says as she smiles for the first time tonight. "I'm okay--except for *le genitori"*--her parents.

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"Eesa no gooda to notta respecta your momma and-a poppa," Tony says in the bogus Italian stage accent that Olive Garden employees are required to use during working hours. "Onna the other handa, soma-times these things don'ta work out," he says with an arched eyebrow, a veiled threat to Alicia's parents.

Alicia is part of a growing phenomenon across America; sullen teenagers of the "baby boom echo" generation who have sought sanctuary among waitstaff and kitchen help at Olive Garden, the Italian restaurant chain whose slogan--"When you're here, you're family"--appeals to youths whose high-pressure upbringing results in frequent disputes and intra-family sniping.

Alicia disappeared for a week last November before the Nilsons obtained a court order forcing her to return to the family home. "It was terrible," says her father, Lloyd, an executive at an insurance company. "All that pasta--she gained ten pounds."

Runaway teenagers get together in comfortable group home-like Italian setting.

Three tables over, seventeen-year-old Charles Barker, whose parents are hoping he'll get into one of two Ivy League colleges at the top of his list, buries his head in his entree when his father peppers him with questions about his essays. "Dad, I don't want to talk about it *all the time!"* he snaps as Maria della Famina appears at their table. "Wassa matter?" she asks in a display of warmth that the chain's "hospitaliano" policy requires staff to display, if not feel.

"He won't shut up about my Harvard and Penn applications," Charles says, a bit mollified by the waitress's friendly tone.

"You no need to go to college!" she says, gesturing broadly with her hands. "My brother Gaetano, he no go to college--he's inna crushed stone business. My father, Giuseppe--he no go to college. He make-a good-a living in hees-a shoe repair business. Fugeddabouta da college--do whatta makes-a you happy!"

A look of enlightenment comes over the young man's face. "You're right," he says, half to himself, looking off into the distance. "I'd like to take a year off, learn how to make stained-glass windows."

His father, sensing trouble, looks desperately around for the owner, then spotting him at the cash register, yells "Check please!"