

DEATH BY DESSERT

AN INTERACTIVE COMEDY IN TWO ACTS

By **Nathan Hartswick**

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*for my daughter Paige,
who guessed correctly*

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SYNOPSIS: It's dinnertime, and you're invited to a meal so good, it's to die for! In New York's little Italy, the Donneducci family and the Duccedonni family have been feuding for a generation, while operating two competing Italian restaurants that share a common wall. At rise, the building's landlord is dead at center stage, and everyone is suspect – from the old-world Italian grandmother and mafia don grandfather to the passionate chefs and bumbling wait staff.

Flashing back in time, the story is told by its victim, who alternately narrates and participates in the action. As customers in the restaurant, the audience is served a delectable meal, but they don't just sit back and watch; each table must cast their vote for whodunit! Will the murderer be ferreted out? Will the feud ever be reconciled? What are the hidden truths about what happened all those years ago?

This offbeat comedic mystery will delight the audience with its fast pace and entertaining story, and engage performers with its host of colorful characters. The play's interactivity makes it ideal for fundraisers, and it can be played with or without the dinner theatre element. Single set is simple and requires no connecting backstage space.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(6 MEN, 6 WOMEN, 1 EITHER, 5 EXTRAS)

MARIA* (m/f) The landlord of the building that houses two feuding restaurants in New York's Little Italy. A tough Brooklyn-ite, she narrates the story of her own murder posthumously. *(48 lines)*

DEATH BY DESSERT

- DON** (m).....The owner of “Donnaducce’s Restaurant.” He is a joyful, fatherly man who lives for food. With his thick Italian accent and pressed suit, he comes across like a mob boss. (78 lines)
- NINO** (m)The chef at “Donnaducce’s,” he is a New Yorker with a short temper, passionate about nothing in life so much as the art of cooking. (52 lines)
- FRANKIE AND LOUIE** (m).....Don’s two idiot henchmen. Technically, they’re waiters in his restaurant, but they do any dirty work he asks them to – usually badly. (*FRANKIE*: 22 lines; *LOUIE*: 11 lines)
- BUSBOY** (m)A down-to-earth young Romeo who has just been hired and fails to see the importance of the feud. Falls for the busgirl of the competing restaurant. (49 lines)
- DONNA** (f).....The owner of “Ducedonni’s Restaurant.” Doesn’t take any lip and plays mother to everyone around her. Don gets under her skin. (63 lines)
- NINA** (f)The chef at “Ducedonni’s.” A laid-back, sensitive artist who can get riled up when her cooking is insulted. (51 lines)
- FRANCIE AND LOUISE** (f).....Two idiotic girls who work for Donna. Technically, they’re waitresses, but they act more like mobsters’ girlfriends. (*FRANCIE*: 18 lines; *LOUISE*: 18 lines)

BUSGIRL (f)A down-to-earth young Juliet who has just been hired and fails to see the importance of the feud. Falls for the busboy of the competing restaurant. (42 lines)

NONNO (m).....Non-speaking. Pantomime character who acts out a flashback at the play's conclusion. Don's father.

NONNA (f).....Non-speaking. Pantomime character who acts out a flashback at the play's conclusion. Donna's mother.

WAITERS A and B, WAITRESSES A, B, and C: Staff that serves the audience its dinner and also interacts onstage. Can be consolidated to a few roles, if desired.

**The role of Maria can be played by an adult. Also, should the director wish to change the name and a few pronouns, it can be played as a male role.*

SCENE

Two competing restaurants in New York City's Little Italy that share a common wall. Present day.

SET

One simple, interior restaurant set with two wings. An EXIT RIGHT leads to the other rooms in the men's restaurant, EXIT LEFT to the same in the women's restaurant. It is not necessary to have connecting backstage space behind the set.

DURATION

Running Time: 60-90 minutes (*Two Acts*)

PRODUCTION NOTES

ONSTAGE PROPERTIES:

Two tables, one on either side of the stage, with two chairs apiece. A red tablecloth on the table at STAGE RIGHT, a green one on the table at STAGE LEFT. Place settings at both tables. On the table at STAGE LEFT, two plastic glasses have been glued to the table (*see EFFECTS AND MUSIC*). Underneath the table at STAGE LEFT is taped a manila envelope with a page inside. A sign at LEFT reads “DUCCEDONNI’S” and a sign at RIGHT reads “DONNADUCCE’S.” An easel at one of the extreme DOWN STAGE corners. A small partition divides the stage.

PROPERTIES BROUGHT ON:

- 1 New York Mets cap (*MARIA has it with her/ on her head at all times*)
- 1 Fork (*MARIA*)
- Crackers, carrots, etc. (*MARIA*)
- 2 Serving trays (*BUSBOY AND BUSGIRL*)
- 2 Dishrags (*BUSBOY AND BUSGIRL*)
- 1 manila envelope with page inside
- 2 plates with apple torts on them, fork (*NINO and NINA*)
- 1 Cannoli
- 2 plates with cake slices on them (*NINO and NINA*)
- 4 vials of poison (*DON, DONNA, FRANKIE AND LOUIE and FRANCIE AND LOUISE*)
- Voting ballots in envelopes, pencils
- Sand-filled feed bags, wrapped in red and green material (*FRANKIE AND LOUIE*)
- 4 additional chairs
- 2 lawn chairs (*NONNO AND NONNA*)
- 2 baby dolls, swaddled (*WAITER A*)
- Water pistol (*WAITER B*)
- Money bag (*WAITER B*)
- 1 purse with cookie inside (*FRANCIE*)
- 1 sign reading “DUCCEDONNDADONNADUCCE’S”

COSTUMES

- MARY Jeans, sneakers, New York Mets baseball jersey or similar style t-shirt, New York Mets cap.
- DON..... The dark, pressed suit of a New York mob boss. A white tie and black shirt, or something similarly sharp. Jacket may be double-breasted.
- NINO A stylish button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, dark purple (*or something equivalent*) to set him apart from the servers. A loosened, solid-colored tie, black pants, polished shoes.
- FRANKIE AND LOUIE..... Waiters with mobster accents. Like the servers, they wear white on top and black on the bottom, but may also have open shirts with gold chains, rolled sleeves, vests, pinky rings, etc. Their costumes should include a little red somewhere as well. Ridiculous dresses and wigs for their “disguise” scene; the more outlandish the better.
- BUSBOY AND BUSGIRL.... Basic white top and black bottom, black bow ties. They are at the bottom of the ladder and do not display the red AND green colors employed by much of the cast.
- DONNA..... A large, floral print dress or matriarchal skirt and blouse combination with shawl. Pearls, earrings, etc.

DEATH BY DESSERT

NINA Functional and stylish. Perhaps a black, floral print skirt and solid-colored blouse, plain flats, corsage, bracelets, ponytail, etc. She is a creative young New Yorker with an idealistic streak. She presents a neat, clean image, differentiated from the servers the way an attractive hostess might look different from the wait staff in a restaurant.

FRANCIE AND LOUISE..... Waitresses with slightly trashy accents. Like the servers, they wear white on top and black on the bottom, but may also have jewelry, purses, gum, outlandish hair, fishnets, high heels, etc. Their costumes should include a little green somewhere as well. Large suit jackets, mustaches and hats for their “disguise” scene.

WAIT STAFF..... White on top, black on bottom. Men wear red ties, women green.

NONNO..... An off-white button down, tan slacks, brown shoes, suspenders. Vest, hat if desired.

NONNA..... The house dress of an old country Italian immigrant. Shawl, pearls if desired.

EFFECTS AND MUSIC

TRICK TABLECLOTH: The green tablecloth at STAGE LEFT should have two slits in it that run from the center of the tablecloth over the back side of the table. Placed in the center of the table are two plastic stemware glasses that have been glued to the table, the tablecloth slits fitting around their bases. When NINA gives the tablecloth a yank, it will slide off easily, leaving the stemware undisturbed.

BODYBAG: Some feedbags attached to each other and filled with something heavy (*like sand*) will work. Wrap the whole thing up in the same green and red material the tablecloths have been made from. The contraption should be roughly the same height as MARIA.

BACKGROUND MUSIC: To play during downtime will heighten the comfort level of audience members sharing the space, particularly if they are dining. Some jazz will do nicely.

SOUND EFFECT: Police siren (*sound effect CD will work*); Bell (*Assign a responsible person to the task of ringing the bell, much of the action hinges upon it. A triangle will work well for this effect*).

AUDITORIUM SETTING

When presented in an auditorium setting without the dinner theatre element, little need change about the production. Simply disregard any remarks in the script about presenting food to the audience. The bit WAITER and WAITRESS roles should still play their speaking parts onstage as if they are wait staff in the two restaurants. Rather than serving the audience food in between, however, they should simply act as ushers in the theatre.

VOTING IN AN AUDITORIUM SETTING: The voting in an auditorium should be executed a bit differently. The following speech should be used in place of the current one MARIA gives to close ACT ONE on Page 31, and it outlines the appropriate changes to the voting procedure:

MARIA: Okay! I think this is about where we came in. So let's move along, shall we? (*The bell rings again, and NINO and NINA unfreeze and EXIT STAGE RIGHT and LEFT, respectively. WAITER A changes over the page on the easel to read "PRIMI."*) Well, I'm going to take a break at this point and grab something to eat; I only had two bites of chocolate cake and I'm starving. Ha ha! But seriously – take this brief intermission to get to know the couple of folks around you. When you've formed a nice little group, our staff members will come around and hand each team a ballot. Discuss everything you've seen

DEATH BY DESSERT

so far with your team. They all had motive. They all had opportunity. It's your job to figure out whodunnit. When you have an idea, mark down your team's vote on the ballot and return it to one of our staff. The break will be about 15 minutes; if you need to get up and stretch or use the restroom, please do so. Just make sure you're back in your seat and your team has voted by the time we're ready to go again. Good luck!

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

The most challenging element to producing this play is that with such a detailed, fast-paced mystery where events repeat themselves (*flashbacks, etc.*) it becomes easy to lose track of critical things like entrances, exits, cake slices, cannoli placement, the manila envelope, etc. Pay special attention to making sure the performers have these things as well memorized as their lines, so the mystery holds together.

Another challenge when presenting the play as dinner theatre, and one that often gets overlooked, is the use of students as servers in the "restaurant." Physical and social concerns such as balancing drinks, following up on customers' needs, etc. need to be taught ahead of time; make sure you budget time for this, too and most importantly, have fun!

ACT ONE

Prior to the start of the action, the audience is seated at tables that share the same space as the stage. Lights are at half and background music plays. [NOTE: See PRODUCTION NOTES for how to present this play in an auditorium rather than as dinner theatre.]

The performance space in front of the audience is set with two nearly identical restaurants: one STAGE LEFT, one STAGE RIGHT. They are separated by a small, unassuming partition at CENTER. This divider should be no more than four feet tall and extend from the back only about halfway downstage, allowing the actors to cross over but still giving the idea that there are two restaurants joined by a common wall.

The restaurant at RIGHT has a small table with a red tablecloth that reaches to the floor. The table has place settings, a centerpiece and two chairs. A sign, either pinned to the back curtain or hung from the set, reads "Donnaducce's," indicating the name of the restaurant run by the men.

The restaurant at LEFT has a small table with a green tablecloth, place settings, a centerpiece and two chairs. A sign mirroring the one at right reads "Duccedonni's," indicating the name of the restaurant run by the women.

The line is blurred for the audience as to which restaurant they are in. Some audience tables have red tablecloths, others green. Waiters with red ties and waitresses with green ties mill about replenishing drinks and bread baskets. They also occasionally walk "onstage" and interact with the action there. This is notated in the script.

An easel sits in one of the extreme DOWN STAGE corners with a blank page on it.

After the audience is settled, the lights go down for several moments. Music fades out.

DEATH BY DESSERT

AT RISE:

LIGHTS UP. There are several differences now, as the action begins: both tables now have a plate on them with a single piece of chocolate cake each. There is a small cannoli haphazardly thrown onto the table at RIGHT.

Most notably, DOWN STAGE CENTER, MARIA ROSSETTI, lies face down, dead on the floor. One arm is extended out in front of her, holding a fork. She wears a New York Mets baseball cap.

NINO, a short-tempered chef with a New York accent, ENTERS STAGE RIGHT. NINA, a passionate chef and an artistic soul, ENTERS STAGE LEFT. They stand in their respective restaurants.

NINO: What the heck just happened?

NINA: I don't know? What did you do?

NINO: I didn't do anything! What did you do?

NINA: Nothing!

A pause as they stare each other down, then they start briskly striding toward CENTER STAGE, yelling.

NINO: I don't know
what you're trying
to pull, missy, but -

NINA: *(Overlapping.)* You
need to relax, Nino,
before something goes -

They reach CENTER STAGE and are about to grapple. They look down and see they are standing over a dead body, and the argument stops.

NINO: *(Checking MARIA's pulse with his watch)* Good Lord.

NINA: Is she . . . dead?

NINO: Either that or my watch has stopped.

NINA: *(Crossing herself.)* My heavens.

NINO: *(Yelling offstage.)* DON! Come quick!

NINA: *(Yelling offstage.)* Mamma Donna! Mamma Donna!

DON DONNADUCCE, an impressive, jolly man with a thick Italian accent, ENTERS STAGE RIGHT. He looks like a mob boss, wears a suit. At the same time, DONNA DUCCEDONNI, a tough, grandmotherly woman, ENTERS STAGE LEFT. They see each other before they see the body.

DONNA: Well, well. If it isn't *Don Donnaducce*.

DON: And if it isn't *Donna Duccedonni*.

DONNA: Hello, *Don*.

DON: Hello, *Donna*.

DON: How are things inn-a *your* restaurant?

DONNA: Fantastic. How are things in yours? Oh, that's right – I don't care.

DON: Things are splendid, *Donna*. Would be better for me if your restaurant had a nice-a-big kitchen fire and burned to the ground. Ha ha!

DONNA: It would be better for me if you were lying dead at my feet.

NINA: Watch your step, *Mamma Donna*.

DONNA: (*Looking down.*) Oh, *mamma mia!* What's happened?

NINO: She's dead.

DON: (*Without remorse.*) Isn't that a shame.

ENTER from STAGE RIGHT FRANKIE and LOUIE, DON's two men. Technically, they're waiters, but they act more like idiotic mob henchmen. FRANKIE has the half a brain among them. LOUIE is extremely dumb and loud.

FRANKIE: Hey hey – what's goin' on, boss?

DON: *Maria's* dead, *Frankie*.

FRANKIE: No kidding! Who dunnit?

DON: *Donn' a-know*. But don't look-a da gift horse in the mouth, right *Frankie*?

LOUIE: Hey, *Frankie*. What's going on? Everybody looks down in the dumps. Somebody die or something?

FRANKIE: *Louie*, you idiot, didn't you just hear? *Maria* was bumped off.

LOUIE: No kidding! Who dunnit?

DEATH BY DESSERT

FRANKIE: Don't know. But don't look a gift horse in the mouth, right Louie?

FRANKIE: Ooh boy, we're gonna get a horse? I love gift horses.

LOUIE: No, I mean this could be Pappa Don's big chance to buy out the whole building. Then we could move up to management!

FRANKIE: Oh. You go; I'll stay down here. I'm afraid of heights.

ENTER, from STAGE LEFT, FRANCIE and LOUISE, DONNA's two ladies. Technically, they're waitresses, but they act more like mobster's girlfriends. FRANCIE is a little dim. LOUISE is flat-out dumb.

FRANCIE: Hey mamma Donna! What's happenin'?

DONNA: Maria's dead, Francie.

FRANCIE: Yeah? Well whudunnit, then?

DONNA: Coulda been anyone, I suppose.

LOUISE: Hey Francie, when we gonna EAT? I'm starvin' over here.

DONNA: You're supposed to worry about serving the food, Louise, not eating it.

FRANCIE: Mamma Donna, when are you gonna let us be chefs in the kitchen, anyway?

DONNA: When Louise starts being able to make a pie without eating all the ingredients before it goes into the oven.

LOUIE: *(Noticing MARIA for the first time.)* Hey, Frankie. What happened to her?

FRANKIE: Quit thinkin', Louie. You're hurtin' yourself.

During the following action, a BUSBOY ENTERS STAGE RIGHT with a tray and a BUSGIRL ENTERS from STAGE LEFT, also with a tray. They wipe down the tables. BUSGIRL picks up a few plates and some silverware, but leaves two glasses on the table. BUSBOY leaves the place settings and cannoli on his table.

DONNA: So how do you think it happened, Nina?

NINA: *(Pulling the fork from MARIA's hand.)* She must have eaten a bite of the cakes we made.

DONNA: But you both made one. Which cake did it?

NINO: My cakes wouldn't hurt a fly. Had to be hers.

NINA: My cakes are very sweet; they'd never do such a thing. Let's find out what happened. *(BUSBOY and BUSGIRL have both picked up the chocolate cakes and put them on their trays. They cross over in front of NINO and NINA on their way off, and are stopped.)*

NINA: *(To BUSGIRL.)* Oh, no no, dear! That's not necessary. Here, let me have that.

NINO: *(To BUSBOY.)* Whaddaya, nuts, ya goomba? That's evidence now. Don't touch anything.

NINO and NINA take the cakes from them. The BUSBOY EXITS STAGE RIGHT, the BUSGIRL STAGE LEFT. NINO and NINA bring the cake plates to center and inspect them.

NINA: Look - she took a bite of both of them.

LOUISE: *(Loudly.)* Um, ess'cuse me. WHY ahh we STANDIN' here lookin' at CAKE? Les'eat it. Gimme.

NINO AND NINA: NO!

DONNA: Louise, you idiot, the cake was poisoned.

LOUISE: Ohhhh. *(Pause.)* Wull . . . C'I have a *little* piece?

A bell rings and everyone freezes. Everyone, that is, except MARIA, who impatiently jumps up to address the audience, removing the baseball cap. She is a tough Brooklyn lady, and the landlord of the building that houses the two restaurants. When speaking to the audience, she generally crosses back and forth in the neutral space at the edge of the stage.

MARIA: *Ahright, that's enough, for crying out loud! Jeez! (To audience.)*

I don't know about you, but that's about as much as I can take of *that*. Whaddaya say we go back to the beginning and find out how this whole thing started? Then maybe you guys can help me figure out who knocked me off.

DEATH BY DESSERT

The bell rings again, the tableau is broken, and the people EXIT off their respective sides quickly without a word. NINO takes his cake plate with him; NINA takes her cake plate and the fork with her. The BUSBOY turns over the paper on the easel on his way out to reveal the word “ANTIPASTI.” MARIA is left alone with the audience, who is served a salad as unobtrusively as possible.

MARIA: All right. My name’s Maria Rossetti. I’m the landlord of this building behind me. Or, I was, before somebody in it killed me. It’s a heckuva thing, this story, because I woulda guessed they’d all end up killin’ each other eventually. I guess I was just in the middle. You kinda gotta be, when you own a building like this. You gotta deal with two families who hate each other’s guts running two restaurants with nearly identical names a stone’s throw apart from each other. (*A beat.*) They’re not the smartest people in Little It’ly. Anyway, I’m just venting. Let’s get you caught up on the story.

From STAGE RIGHT, DON ENTERS with an entourage consisting of NINO, FRANKIE, LOUIE and BUSBOY. DON pulls a chair to the center of the room and sits. The rest sit on the floor facing him, like children about to be told a story from Grandpa. Simultaneously, DONNA ENTERS from STAGE LEFT with a similar entourage consisting of NINA, FRANCIE, LOUISE and BUSGIRL. She sits in a chair, and they sit on the floor. As this all happens, MARIA continues speaking.

MARIA: These two families, many years ago, had a tiny molehill they turned into Mount Vesuvius. See, what happened was – you know what? I may as well just let them tell you. Now, pay attention. I don’t wanna hafta explain this to you later on. (*MARIA winks and EXITS STAGE LEFT.*)

NINO: Hey Don, what happened all those years ago, anyway?

NINA: Will you tell us the story, Momma Donna?

FRANKIE: (*Forced; robot-like.*) Yes. Please tell us the story of how two families who hate each other’s guts came to be running two restaurants with nearly identical names a stone’s throw apart from each other.

DON AND DONNA: Well, I don't know...

ALL BUT DON AND DONNA: Pleeeeeassee...?

DON AND DONNA: Oh, all right.

DON and DONNA tell their stories, each completely oblivious to the other.

DON: It all began on a dark and stormy night when my father first came to this country.

DONNA: One bright spring day long ago, my mother married. This was a mistake, because my Nonna was a beautiful, lovely woman, and the man was an insufferable jerk. And ugly.

DON: My Nonno – a handsomer man than even myself – met a witch who tricked him into marrying her.

DONNA: They were happy for awhile.

DON: This witch was a very ugly woman.

DONNA: They got a nice little apartment.

DON: Like someone hadda whacked her in the face with a frying pan!

DONNA: They decided to open a little restaurant together.

DON: And *dumber* than a box of *rocks*, my little ones.

DONNA: But there was one problem.

DON: When they opened up their restaurant, they couldn't agree on the name.

DONNA: Clearly, since the idea had been Nonna's, it should have been called "Ducedonni's."

DON: Obviously, since Nonno spent his own hard-earned money, it should have been called "Donnaducce's."

DONNA: But the evil man would not have it.

DON: The wicked ugly stupid witch said forget it!

DONNA: So they split everything up – the apartment, the bills, and yes – even the restaurant.

DON: Nonno built this wall with his own two hands! "To keep out the witches," he used to say!

DONNA: And Nonna named her restaurant "Ducedonni's."

DON: And Nonno named his restaurant "Donnaducce's."

DON AND DONNA: As it should be!

DEATH BY DESSERT

DON: They had no children together.

DONNA: They remarried other people – better people – and although they shared this very wall for 30 years...

DON AND DONNA: They never spoke to each other again.

ALL BUT DON AND DONNA: Wowwww...

DON: Are there any questions? (*FRANKIE raises his hand.*) Yes, Frankie.

FRANKIE: How ugly was she again –

DON: (*Interrupting; shouting.*) A face like a bull MAS-tiff, my friend!

ALL EXIT off their sides, except the BUSBOY and BUSGIRL, who are wiping down their tables. MARIA RE-ENTERS STAGE LEFT. She munches on a carrot stick.

MARIA: Pretty ridiculous, isn't it. Now check out what happens next. I love this part.

MARIA EXITS STAGE RIGHT. After a moment, the BUSBOY and BUSGIRL look around to make sure no one is watching and crouch down in front of the wall. Simultaneously, they cup their UP STAGE hands and listen to the wall, trying to hear what is on the other side. Hearing nothing, they stand and walk DOWN STAGE along the wall slowly. When they reach the end together, they are back-to-back, and bump into each other. She screams, falling back into his arms, and he laughs. They occupy DOWN STAGE CENTER, the common space between the two restaurants.

BUSBOY: Shhh! Ha-ha...shhh! It's okay!

BUSGIRL: What are you doing?

BUSBOY: What am I doing? What were you doing?

BUSGIRL: The same thing you were doing, apparently. Only you're finding it much funnier.

BUSBOY: Ha ha... I'm sorry. Are you okay?

BUSGIRL: I'll be okay. If I can get my heart going again.

BUSBOY: Mine stopped too.

BUSGIRL: Why? You scared?

BUSBOY: Nope.

BUSGIRL: *(A beat; smiling.)* Oh. *(He lets go of her.)*

BUSBOY: Did you just start over there?

BUSGIRL: Yeah, I was hired as a busgirl last week.

BUSBOY: Me too. Well – a busboy.

BUSGIRL: How do you like it?

BUSBOY: It's all right. They take this feud thing a little too seriously.

BUSGIRL: I agree.

BUSBOY: Hey, lemme see in there.

BUSGIRL: What? Oh, no –

BUSBOY: C'mon, let's see what the stink is all about. *(He drags her to STAGE LEFT.)*

BUSGIRL: I don't think you're supposed to do that –

BUSBOY: Wow, this is just like ours!

BUSGIRL: Stop! *(She begins to laugh.)*

BUSBOY: No! Betchya can't catch me!

He runs around the table. She chases him half-heartedly. They are both laughing.

BUSGIRL: Shh! Stop! You'll get us in trouble!

He ducks under the table and she stops running after him.

BUSGIRL: All right, come out of there now.

BUSBOY: Come and get me!

BUSGIRL: Seriously, now, you're gonna get us into –

BUSBOY: Hey – what's this?

BUSGIRL: What's what?

BUSBOY pulls a manila envelope from the underside of the table, where it has been taped. He gets out from under the table, opens the envelope, pulls out a piece of paper and reads it.

BUSGIRL: Quit it! That's not yours!

BUSBOY: Oh, don't be such a goody twoshoe – *(Stops.)* Holy moly.

DEATH BY DESSERT

BUSGIRL: What?

BUSBOY: Look at this. *(He shows her the paper, a bell rings, and they freeze. MARIA ENTERS from STAGE RIGHT.)*

MARIA: *(To the frozen BUSBOY and BUSGIRL.)* Hey! You're not supposed to see that! *(To AUDIENCE.)* Little stinkers. Oh well – impetuous youth. Whaddaya gonna do. So now that you've seen the backstory and the love story, let's get to the real story: me. If you'll pardon me, I'll have to step into my old shoes for a minute here and join the world of the living.

MARIA sticks on her baseball cap, a New York Mets hat she keeps handy throughout the play, taking it on and off as indicated. A bell rings and BUSBOY and BUSGIRL unfreeze. BUSBOY EXITS STAGE RIGHT. BUSGIRL, still holding the envelope, EXITS STAGE LEFT – but on her way off, MARIA grabs the envelope from her. MARIA CROSSES over with it and EXITS STAGE RIGHT. WAITRESS A enters from STAGE LEFT. At the same time, NINO ENTERS STAGE RIGHT with a plate holding an apple tort and a fork. He crosses angrily over to STAGE LEFT.

WAITRESS A: Can I help you, sir?

NINO: I wanna see your chef. Nina! NINA! Get your keister out here!

WAITRESS A: Sir, if you'll just relax...

NINO: I will not relax!

WAITRESS A: I'll go get Mamma Donna.

NINO: Get Nina! This is an outrage! *(WAITRESS A EXITS STAGE LEFT. NINO talks to himself, and paces.)* Thinks she can just go off and steal my...I'll show that little...always tryin' to...of all the rotten, stinkin' nerve...

NINA ENTERS STAGE LEFT.

NINA: Oh, it's you. What do you want, Nino.

NINO: EXHIBIT A! An apple tort from YOUR restaurant, obtained by my undercover spy!

NINA: Your point?

NINO: Taste, texture, color and body! All identical to my own apple tort, passed down through generations! Where'd you steal the secret recipe?

NINA: You're delusional. Maybe you copied *my* tort.

NINO: PREPOSTEROUS!

NINA: Hold on; I'll get one of mine and we'll see how they stack up.

NINO: You do that, toots!

NINA EXITS STAGE LEFT. DON ENTERS STAGE RIGHT and crosses over to STAGE LEFT.

DON: What's going on?

NINO: She stole my tort recipe!

DON: Who?

DONNA: (*Entering, STAGE LEFT.*) What's going on?

DON: She stole his tort recipe.

DONNA: Who?

MARIA: (*Entering, STAGE RIGHT, crossing over.*) What's going on?

DONNA: She stole his tort recipe.

MARIA: Who?

NINA RE-ENTERS STAGE LEFT with an apple tort on a plate, and a fork.

NINO: Her! (*To NINA.*) You stole my tort recipe!

NINA: You stole mine!

NINO: I did not! Change your recipe!

NINA: Change yours!

NINO: No! I'm against tort reform!

MARIA: All right, guys, settle down. Lemme try. (*MARIA takes a bite of each tort.*) Wow.

NINA: Well?

MARIA: They do taste similar.

NINO: You see?

MARIA: They're both pretty average.

NINA: What?

NINO: WHAT?!

MARIA: *(To DON.)* Go ahead, try this.

DON: Yes, let-a me be the judge.

DONNA: Oh, you'd eat cardboard if it had butter and garlic on it. Let me try.

DON tries one cake while DONNA tries the other, then they switch.

DON: Tastes fine to me.

NINA: "Fine?!"

DONNA: It's okay.

NINO: "OKAY?!" *(He throws his hands up in the air, exasperated.)*

NINA: What do you have to do to impress people, anyway.

MARIA: Admit it, guys, it's just all right. Room for improvement. Mediocre. Decent. Average. Nice try; try again.

NINO: That does it. *(To NINA.)* I challenge you, with these uncultured people as my witnesses, to a battle of culinary skill. Choose a dish. We both cook it. *(To MARIA.)* And YOU. You judge.

MARIA: Oh, I don't want to be put in the middle, really.

NINO: Maybe you'd like a knuckle sandwich instead.

MARIA: I'll do it.

NINO: Good choice. And we'll try each others' dishes as well. I'll try yours and you try mine.

NINA: I've got no problem with that.

DON: *(Delighted.)* Oh boy. I haven't seen an old-fashioned bake-off since the Ippolito soufflé incident of '82. What are you all-a makin'?

NINO: *(To NINA.)* Your call.

NINA: Chocolate cake.

NINO: You're on.

DON: Oh, I LOVE-a-da chocolate cake!

DONNA: What a surprise.

DON: You had better make-a some extra for Pappa Don.

DONNA: You're going to be eating this cake?

DON: I will be eating a very large slice of this cake, yes.

DONNA: Interesting.

DON: Why?

DONNA: Oh...no reason. I was just wondering. A very large slice, you say?

DON: Large enough to suffocate a woolly mammoth.

DONNA: Interesting.

DON: Why do you keep saying that?

DONNA: No reason.

WAITRESS B ENTERS STAGE LEFT and is walking by. NINO catches her.

NINO: Hey, miss.

WAITRESS B: Yes, sir?

NINO: Take these for us, wouldya? *(He hands her the two torts.)*

WAITRESS B: Certainly, sir. *(WAITRESS B EXITS STAGE LEFT.)*

NINO: All right, Nina. The challenge is on. Cook your cake, you plagiarizing pastry pilferer.

NINA: Oh, I will.

NINO: Fine.

NINA: Fine.

NINO EXITS STAGE RIGHT. NINA and DONNA EXIT STAGE LEFT. MARIA and DON cross over to STAGE RIGHT.

DON: Mmm, chocolate cake. I can hardly wait. So, Maria, when are you going to sell me this nice little building of yours so I can make-a-da just one restaurant?

MARIA: I'm not going to sell, Don, you know that.

DON: Oh, that's-a too bad. And how's everything going for you these days, Maria?

MARIA: Well, other than a nagging sense of looming dread, I'm doing great. How about you?

DON: Oh, fine. You should watch that looming dread, though. What if something were to happen to you? For instance, oh, I don't know, what if, say, you were to eat a piece of poisoned chocolate...*(He catches himself.)* Er, cream pie? Who would the building go to then?

DEATH BY DESSERT

MARIA: Well, I don't have any family to speak of. And typically in that case the property is auctioned off.

DON: Auctioned off, you say? Interesting.

MARIA: Yeah, some rich guy usually snaps it up. But my will –

DON: Someone rich, you say?

MARIA: Yeah.

DON: Interesting.

MARIA: Why do you keep saying that?

DON: No reason.

MARIA: Okay.

DON: Well, I've got to go count my millions of dollars and make a few... arrangements... *(Forced; with a sidelong glance.)* ...that are not at all homicidal in nature. If you'll excuse me.

MARIA: Sure.

DON EXITS STAGE RIGHT. MARIA takes off the baseball cap and addresses the audience.

MARIA: Why am I always put in the middle, anyway? Oh well. Let's get back to those two kids, and see what they're up to.

MARIA EXITS STAGE RIGHT. BUSBOY ENTERS STAGE RIGHT, BUSGIRL STAGE LEFT. They wipe down their tables, stage whispering.

BUSBOY: Psst!

BUSGIRL: Hey!

BUSBOY: You over there?

BUSGIRL: Yeah!

BUSBOY: Whatchya doing?

BUSGIRL: Working! Anybody on your side?

BUSBOY: Just me! C'mere! *(She sneaks across to his side. They smile at each other.)*

BUSBOY: Hi.

BUSGIRL: Hi.

BUSBOY: So?

BUSGIRL: What?

BUSBOY: You like me, don't ya.

BUSGIRL: Of course.

BUSBOY: You wanna maybe catch a movie tonight?

BUSGIRL: I don't know if I should...

BUSBOY: Why not?

BUSGIRL: If they find out, we'd prob'ly lose our jobs, don't you think?

BUSBOY: Maybe we should just quit.

BUSGIRL: Yeah, but I like it here. I mean, they're goofy people, but...

BUSBOY: Yeah, I do too. Man, this feud is so stupid.

BUSGIRL: Well it's not like there's anything we can do about it, they're
so -

BUSBOY: Shh! Someone's coming!

BUSGIRL: Okay! *(She starts off. He takes her hand and stops her.)*

BUSBOY: Movie? Tonight?

BUSGIRL: *(Thinking about it.)* Um...okay.

BUSBOY: Excellent. See you then!

*BUSGIRL EXITS STAGE LEFT. BUSBOY does a little jig, then
CROSSES to STAGE RIGHT. BUSBOY EXITS STAGE RIGHT, passing
DON as he is ENTERING STAGE RIGHT with FRANKIE and LOUIE.
Simultaneously, DONNA ENTERS STAGE LEFT with FRANCIE and
LOUISE. As they are talking, DON presses a small vial into FRANKIE's
hand, and DONNA presses one into FRANCIE's hand.*

DON: *(Entering.)* ...so obviously, it's gotta look like they did it.

DONNA: ...put it in theirs so it looks like his own people did it.

DON: You understand?

DONNA: Capiisce?

FRANCIE: Oh, I'm so on your train, Momma Donna.

FRANKIE: Sure, boss. We get it. *(He pockets the vial. Immediately
LOUIE takes it from FRANKIE's pocket and plays with it. FRANKIE
doesn't notice.)*

DON: You'll need to be little diabolos. Find a way to sneak in over there
without being noticed. Be smart.

DONNA: Use your superior intellect, ladies.

LOUISE: *(Scratching her head.)* Our what?

DEATH BY DESSERT

DONNA: Nevermind.

FRANKIE: Say, boss, you think if we do a good job on this one, we can be managers of the restaurant when you buy the building?

DON: You just concentrate on doing something right for a change, and we'll go from there.

FRANKIE: Don't worry, boss. We're on top of it. *(He checks his pocket to present the vial, realizes it's missing. Sees it in LOUIE's hands, grabs it.)* Gimme that.

LOUIE: Frankie, what's goin' on? My head hurts.

FRANKIE: Well it ain't from overuse.

DON: In my day, we use-ta have *smart* henchmen, you know that?

FRANCIE: Mamma Donna, if we do a good job –

DONNA: It'll be a miracle.

FRANKIE: But can we work in the kitchen?

LOUISE: I'm HUNGRY. What are we doing again?

DONNA: Oh, dear Lord. My poor mamma, Nonna Duccedonni – rest her soul...

DON: My dear pappa, Nonno Donnaducci...

DONNA: She'd be up in arms right now.

DON: He'd be rolling over in his grave – if only we hadn't cremated him.

DONNA: Now go.

DON: Get outta my sight, you fools.

FRANKIE and LOUIE EXIT STAGE RIGHT. FRANCIE and LOUISE EXIT STAGE LEFT. DON pulls another vial out, as does DONNA.

DON: Of course, I don't know if I trust those two lunk-a-heads.

DONNA: I may have to stay one step behind those two.

DON: After all, if-a you want something done-a right...

DONNA: Sometimes you've gotta do it yourself...

DON EXITS STAGE RIGHT. DONNA EXITS STAGE LEFT. MARIA ENTERS STAGE RIGHT, without the baseball cap, crossing over. She is eating a couple of crackers.

MARIA: Ah, the plot thickens. Let's see how the movie was, huh?

MARIA EXITS STAGE LEFT. BUSGIRL ENTERS STAGE LEFT with a tray holding a single cannoli. BUSBOY ENTERS STAGE RIGHT.

BUSGIRL: Hey!

BUSBOY: Yeah?

BUSGIRL: C'mere a sec!

He sneaks across to STAGE LEFT. She sets the tray with the cannoli down on the table. They smile at each other.

BUSBOY: Lousy movie last night, huh?

BUSGIRL: Oh, terrible.

BUSBOY: Yeah, but that's okay. I had fun anyway.

BUSGIRL: Me too.

BUSBOY: So, you wanna maybe sneak out behind our employers' backs again sometime?

BUSGIRL: Definitely. Maybe someday we won't need to –

DONNA: *(From offstage.)* Can you help me in the kitchen, dear?

BUSGIRL: *(Calling offstage.)* Just a second! *(To BUSBOY.)* I gotta go.

She crosses to STAGE LEFT. He follows.

BUSBOY: Wait!

BUSGIRL: What?

BUSBOY: Um... I forget.

BUSGIRL: *(Being cute.)* Well, I'll just stand here til you remember it.

BUSBOY: I'll keep forgetting, so you'll keep standing here.

BUSGIRL: I'll keep standing here so you'll keep forgetting so I can keep—

As a bell rings, BUSBOY and BUSGIRL freeze, and MARIA ENTERS STAGE LEFT without the cap, interrupting the action.

DEATH BY DESSERT

MARIA: All right, that's enough of THAT. *(She CROSSES OVER and sits in a chair at the table at STAGE RIGHT.)* Let's fast forward to the end, here.

The bell rings again, and the BUSBOY and BUSGIRL unfreeze. MARIA dons her cap and looks over the menu casually.

BUSBOY: *(Smiling.)* Bye.

BUSGIRL: *(Smiling.)* Bye.

BUSGIRL EXITS STAGE LEFT. BUSBOY picks up her tray with the cannoli on it, CROSSES OVER to STAGE RIGHT, sees MARIA.

BUSBOY: *(Nervously; caught flirting.)* Oh. Hey Maria.

MARIA: *(MARIA barely looks up from her menu.)* Don't worry, I won't tell.

BUSBOY: Um... huh?

MARIA: About you two crazy kids.

BUSBOY: Oh... okay. Thanks. Cannoli?

MARIA: Hey, sure, thanks.

MARIA casually takes the cannoli and bites it. DON ENTERS STAGE RIGHT, singing an Italian aria merrily. He stops abruptly when he sees the cannoli.

DON: What is this?

MARIA: *(Through a mouthful.)* Cannoli.

DON: Why was I not informed?

BUSBOY: I'll get you one, sir.

DON: You think-a-da old man wouldn't want a snack, too?

BUSBOY: No, sir, I—

DON: The old man likes his cannolis!

BUSBOY: Yes, sir. I'll get you one.

DON: I'll come-a with you.

DON is about to follow BUSBOY off STAGE RIGHT. MARIA stands up and takes off her cap. She is eye-to-eye with the BUSBOY, and addresses him by accident.

MARIA: Hey, here comes the good part.

BUSBOY: *(Oblivious to her comment, he turns around; addresses DON.)* Did you say something?

MARIA: *(To audience.)* Whoops.

DON: *(To BUSBOY.)* I didn't say a thing.

BUSBOY: Oh. *(He shrugs, walks past MARIA as if she doesn't exist. DON follows. The two EXIT STAGE RIGHT. MARIA repeats her comment, this time to the audience.)*

MARIA: Hey, here comes the good part.

MARIA EXITS STAGE RIGHT with the cannoli. We hear NINO and NINA's voices from offstage.

NINO: *(Offstage.)* HERE IT COMES, LADIES AND GENTS! THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUSLY DECADENT CHOCOLATE CAKE!

NINA: *(Offstage.)* I THINK NOT! THE WORLD HAS YET TO TASTE MY MURDEROUSLY MOUTHWATERING CHOCOLATE CAKE!

They ENTER from their respective wings holding a plate of chocolate cake each. They place them on their tables and stride briskly to CENTER STAGE, where they meet. They exchange quips quickly, almost overlapping each other.

NINO: Chef.

NINA: Chef.

NINO: Hello.

NINA: Hello.

NINO: Well?

NINA: Well what?

NINO: You ready?

NINA: I was born ready.

DEATH BY DESSERT

NINO: Let the tasting begin.

NINA: Bring it on.

NINO: Indeed.

NINO: Where's our judge?

NINA: No idea.

A beat.

NINO AND NINA: MARIA!

NINO EXITS STAGE RIGHT; NINA EXITS STAGE LEFT. A moment later, FRANCIE and LOUISE ENTER STAGE LEFT, dressed in suit jackets, fake mustaches and hats.

FRANCIE: I feel like an idiot.

LOUISE: *(Shouts.)* I hardly recka-nize you, Francie!

FRANCIE: Shh! Don't say my name! We're trying to blend in here!

LOUISE: I said your name?

FRANCIE: Yes!

LOUISE: How could I have done that? I don't even know which one of us is Francie and which one is... what's my name again?

FRANCIE: Louise.

LOUISE: Louise, right.

WAITER B: *(ENTERING STAGE RIGHT and seeing them.)* Can I... help you?

FRANCIE: *(Nervously.)* Oh Hi! Hi there! We're the new waiters.

WAITER B: I don't think we're expecting any – *(LOUISE stupidly waves her hands in front of WAITER B's face, trying to hypnotize him.)*

LOUISE: OOOOOH! You will do as we sayyyyyy!

WAITER B: What?

FRANCIE: *(To LOUISE.)* Shut up. *(To WAITER B.)* Go ask your manager. We're the new guys. Go ask him.

WAITER B: *(Reluctantly.)* Okay... *(WAITER B EXITS STAGE RIGHT.)*

FRANCIE: Okay, now come on. You got the bottle, right?

LOUISE: Sure. *(LOUISE produces the vial DONNA gave them earlier.)*

FRANCIE: All right. We can't screw this up. If we do a good job, Mamma Donna's gonna let us cook in the kitchen from now on.

LOUISE: That means FOOD, right?

FRANCIE: All you can eat. C'mon, let's go. *(They CROSS to STAGE RIGHT. They approach the Donnaducce's cake. After a moment, they hear voices offstage.)* Somebody's coming! Quick! Back here!

They duck behind the table. FRANKIE and LOUIE ENTER STAGE RIGHT, dressed in sequined dresses and boas.

FRANKIE: I feel like an idiot.

LOUIE: *(Shouting, stupidly.)* I FEEL PRETTY!

FRANKIE: Whose idea was this, anyway? Are we really blending in, here?

LOUIE: *(Still shouting.)* OH SO PRETTY!

FRANKIE: Shut up!

WAITRESS C: *(ENTERING STAGE LEFT.)* Hello. Can I... help you?

FRANKIE: Uh, yeah. We'd like to apply as waitresses.

WAITRESS C: All right. What are your qualifications?

LOUIE: *(Singing loudly.)* I FEEL PRETTY, AND WITTY, AND BRIGHT!

FRANKIE: Shh! *(To WAITRESS C.)* Sorry.

WAITRESS C: Um... I'll get a manager.

WAITRESS C EXITS STAGE LEFT. FRANKIE pulls from his pocket the vial DON gave them.

FRANKIE: You're such an idiot. C'mon, let's get this over with.

They CROSS to STAGE LEFT. As FRANKIE and LOUIE stand in front of the Duccedonni's table, backs to the audience, FRANCIE and LOUISE stand up from behind the table and assume the same position in front of the Donnaducce's cake.

A bell rings. ALL freeze. BLACKOUT. Confused, disembodied voices in the dark ad. lib.: Hey! What's going on? Who cut the lights? What's the big idea? etc.

DEATH BY DESSERT

After a few moments, the lights come back up. The stage is the same, except that in addition to FRANCIE, LOUISE, FRANKIE and LOUIE, there are others onstage: DON, DONNA, BUSBOY, BUSGIRL, NINO and NINA. They all look at each other, then at the audience. They freeze suspiciously, as if caught in the headlights; after a beat, they all bolt off their respective sides of the stage.

A pause, then MARIA ENTERS STAGE RIGHT wearing the baseball cap. She still holds the cannoli.

MARIA: Nino! Nina! Where'd you guys go? Are we gonna do this thing or what? (She turns around and notices the two pieces of cake.) Oh. Cool. (MARIA strolls to STAGE RIGHT, puts the half-eaten cannoli down on the table, and takes a bite of the Donnaducce's cake.) Hm. Not bad. Good flavor. Nice body. Tangy aftertaste. (She walks to STAGE LEFT and takes a bite of the Duccedonni's cake. Holding the fork, she strolls back to CENTER STAGE, musing.) Pretty good. Rich. Sweet. Acidic after bite. Now let's see... which one is better? (She takes off the cap and addresses the audience.) And I think this is where I start to feel a little woozy. (She clutches her head.) Yup. As I recall, it's about five seconds from now that I start to lose my balance, and before I know what hits me, (She puts on the cap.) I'm lying on the floor, as dead as a – (She falls to the floor, face-first, with a thud. Her hand is out in front of her, holding the fork. The scene now looks precisely as it did at the start of the play.)

After a beat, NINO ENTERS STAGE RIGHT. NINA ENTERS STAGE LEFT. They stand in their respective restaurants.

NINO: What the heck just happened?

NINA: I don't know? What did you do?

NINO: I didn't do anything! What did you do?

NINA: Nothing!

A pause as they stare each other down, then they start briskly striding toward CENTER STAGE, yelling.

NINO: I don't know
what you're trying
to pull, missy, but -

NINA: *(Overlapping.)* You
need to relax, Nino,
before something goes -

They reach CENTER STAGE and are about to grapple. They look down and see they are standing over a dead body, and the argument stops.

NINO: *(Checking MARIA's pulse with his watch.)* Good Lord.

NINA: Is she... dead?

NINO: Either that or my watch has stopped. *(A bell rings, NINO and NINA freeze, and MARIA pops up from her place on the floor, removing her cap.)*

MARIA: Okay! I think this is about where we came in. So let's move along, shall we?

The bell rings again, and NINO and NINA unfreeze and EXIT STAGE RIGHT and LEFT, respectively. WAITER A changes over the page on the easel to read "PRIMI."

MARIA: Hey, who else is hungry? I only had two bites of chocolate cake and I'm starving. Ha ha! As our waiters and waitresses come around to serve you a delectable Italian entree, think about everything you've seen so far. They all had motive. They all had opportunity. It's your job as a table to figure out whodunnit. When you have an idea, open the envelope on your table, mark down your vote and hand it to your server. Enjoy your meal, and good luck!

MARIA EXITS STAGE RIGHT. Lights fade to half onstage, music plays, and the audience is served an entrée – pasta and a vegetable, for example. After they have finished eating and voting, they are served chocolate cake with a joke and a wink from their waiters and waitresses.
END OF ACT ONE.

DEATH BY DESSERT

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