

SIX ITALIANS, SEVEN FISHES

CHARACTERS

MARIE: Matriarch of the family. In her late fifties or early sixties.

JOE: Marie's husband.

CATHERINE: Marie's slightly younger sister.

TONY: Catherine's husband.

TESS: Marie and Joe's daughter. In her thirties.

MIKE: Tony and Catherine's son. In his thirties.

VINNIE: Marie and Catherine's younger brother.

PEONY: Vinnie's wife and the only nonItalian in the family.

SIX ITALIANS, SEVEN FISHES

Marie and Joe's house. Up left, MARIE and CATHERINE prepare dinner. Down right, JOE and TONY are on the couch. TESS perches on the arm of the couch. MIKE sets the table downstage.

MARIE

Therese Marie, get your butt off the couch and get Grandma's pitcher from the pantry.

TONY

(Looking at his device). I should do it. I only got 1300 steps today.

MIKE

Forget it, Dad. It's a holiday. Don't worry about the steps. I'll get it Aunt Marie. *(exits)*

TESS

Do we have to use it, Ma? It's so ugly.

MARIE

Hey. Have some respect. That pitcher was a wedding gift to Grandma from Giovanni Vizzoni. And the Vizzoni's had a lot of money. It's imported. Hand made. It's been on our Christmas Eve table since before you were born.

TESS

It's so big. There's only eight of us this year ya know.

MARIE

Don't remind me. Seven Fishes and only eight people. My mother would be ashamed.

JOE

What do you suppose is keeping Vinnie and Peony?

MARIE

Peony is keeping Vinnie and Peony. Before my brother married her he was always on time.

MIKE

The weather is pretty bad, Aunt Marie. And it's only 8:05.

MARIE

But we said 8:00. We need to make midnight mass.

TESS

And we've only got four hours.

TONY

You got me thinking about the Vizzoni's now. You kids remember Giovanni from the old neighborhood or were you too little? He used to always give you half dollars.

MIKE

(Entering with a large elaborate pitcher). Sure. Short little guy. Really old. What did we call him? Something funny.

TESS

Goombah John. *(TESS pronounces it GOOM bah)*

MARIE

Not GOOM bah. Goom BAH. Goom BAH. *(She mutters to herself)*

MIKE

Right. What does that mean, Goombah. Is it uncle or something?

JOE

No. It's godfather isn't it Marie?

MARIE:

No. Not godfather. I think it's something you say to show respect.

TONY:

(Takes out his phone). Siri. What is the meaning of goombah in Italian?

CATHERINE

Tony what did I tell you. Put that thing away. It's Christmas Eve!

SIRI

Searching for the meaning of Goombah.

CATHERINE

Turn it off Tone.

MIKE

Wait, Ma. I want to hear what it means.

SIRI:

Goombah is a term for someone from the southern portion of Italy or Sicily. It is often used as a somewhat derogatory term although not as offensive as dago or wop.

MARIE

Well see. The phone is stupid. That isn't right. Goombah is a term of honor.

TESS

I thought Italian was supposed to be a beautiful language. Goombah?

MARIE

It is a beautiful language. You should have taken it in school. But no, you had to take Spanish.

JOE

That's more useful for her, Marie. We should all know Spanish these days.

MIKE

I don't think Goombah is real Italian. It's Americanized. Pidgin Italian.

TESS

You know the other word Grandma used to say that I thought was disgusting when I was a kid. Gabbagool. And it's some kind of food, right?

TONY

Oh sure. Gabbagool. It's meat. Like a lunchmeat.

TESS

No wonder I became a vegetarian.

TONY

What's the real word for it, Catherine?

MIKE

Capicola.

MARIE

(Exits and returns quickly with a piece. to TESS). See. Here. This is gabbagool.

TESS

Eew! Get it away from me, Ma. You know how I feel about meat. If that even is meat.

MARIE

I wasn't making you eat it. It wouldn't hurt you to be a little more openminded about things, you know.

TESS:

Because I don't want to eat other living creatures.

MARIE

(*Waving the lunchmeat*). Does this look like a living thing to you?

TESS

This is the season of love, Ma. Do you know how animals suffer when they go to be slaughtered.

JOE

Hey! Not today Therese Marie. Nonna your lectures.

TESS

Yeah, I know Dad. I'm just saying Jesus would not want animals to suffer for us.

CATHERINE

So, what? You think Jesus didn't eat meat?

TESS

I don't remember anything in the Bible where he eats meat.

CATHERINE

It must be in there somewhere.

TONY

Fishes. He clearly ate fish. You know, with the loaves.

TESS

The apostles handed them out. Jesus didn't even touch them. I don't think there's any part where he's actually eating them.

TONY

But I'm saying he didn't disapprove of eating the fishes.

TESS

The last supper. It's just bread and wine.

MARIE

Don't be silly. It's just they only mention the bread and the wine. Nobody has twelve people over for dinner and there's just bread and wine. Jesus wouldn't do that.

CATHERINE

I'm pretty sure He ate lamb.

TESS

He WAS the lamb. That doesn't mean he ate lamb.

MARIE

So all those shepherds bringing their lambs to the stable. You don't think people were going to eat those lambs.

TESS

He was a baby!

MIKE

He was Jewish. I'm pretty sure he ate what Jews ate.

CATHERINE

So you think he was kosher? I never think of Mary keeping kosher.

TONY

You think about Mary cooking?

CATHERINE

Sure. She was a mother. She had to cook.

TESS

You're riding into town on a donkey. You really think God expects you to cart two sets of dinnerware?

MARIE

You are getting very close to blasphemy young lady.

TESS

I'm just saying I don't think you can say that Jesus ate meat.

TONY

Siri, did Jesus eat meat?

SIRI

Did you want to meet Jesus?

CATHERINE

Tone!

TONY

No, Siri. Did Jesus eat meat?

SIRI

Did you say, I want to meet Jesus?

CATHERINE

You want to meet Jesus keep talking on that stupid phone. Mikey, slap that thing out of your father's hand.

TESS

(Teasing). Yeah, MIKEY.

(TESS and MIKE play fight). I could beat you up when we were kids and I can do it now.

MIKE

Only when you caught me when Angelo wasn't around.

MARIE

Tell me again why Angie and Mary and the kids couldn't come tonight.

CATHERINE

You know why, Marie. They're with her people. They'll come by Tone and me tomorrow. I invited her family to be by us Christmas Day so they could come tonight but it didn't work out.

MARIE

So they have to drive all that way by her people in this weather. What is it? More than an hour. It isn't safe. They should be here.

TESS

I drove longer than that to get here, Ma. It didn't seem to bother you.

MARIE

I worried about you. But you don't have kids. I mean it would be terrible if anything happened to you, but you know if something happened to Angie and Mary it would be a tragedy. Is it still snowing so bad Joe?

JOE

(checking). Coming down like crazy. That must be what's keeping Vinnie and Peony.

TESS

And Vinnie and Peony have kids so I guess we really need to worry about them

MARIE

Their kids are grown. And you don't need to have an attitude.

TESS

What? Just because you said my life has less value because I don't have kids.

MIKE

That's not what your mom said. Exactly.

TESS

Hey you don't have kids either. You could be a little offended.

MARIE

He's a man.

TESS

Oh yeah well THAT makes it all better.

CATHERINE

Mike and Tess can still have kids. They're young.

MARIE

Mike, sure.

TESS

He's a man.

MARIE

You want to start about biology now. Yeah, he's a man. He's got more time than you.

JOE

If they have kids great. If they don't, they don't. It's their lives, Marie.

TESS

Please note the childless ones are the ones who showed up. I don't see Vinnie and the kids here either.

JOE

Vinnie's on his way. He'll get here.

TESS

Not Vinnie my uncle. Vinnie my cousin. As in Vinnie and Kirsten. And their kid. The baby. Whatever he is to me.

MIKE

Our first cousin once removed.

TONY

He's Vincent too I think. But they call him something funny.

TESS

Mini Vinnie?

MARIE:

No that's not it.

JOE

She was being sarcastic, Marie.

MARIE

I can't tell with her.

MIKE

I think they're calling him Trey.

TONY

What, like the playing card?

MIKE

Because he's Vincent the third. Three. Trey.

TONY

So it is like the playing card.

MIKE

Yeah, Dad. I guess. Anyway, they all went to the Barbados for the holidays.

MARIE

They took that little baby to the Barbados! That's his first Christmas! Instead of here with his family. What is wrong with people!

JOE

They love it there. That's their tradition now. Remember they had the wedding there.

MARIE

Remember! How could I forget. Three thousand dollars for all of us to go and sit in our good clothes on a beach. They didn't even have a Mass. That is not a wedding.

TESS

I thought it was beautiful.

CATHERINE

It was pretty in the evening with the ocean. But so many of the family couldn't make it.

MARIE

Sunsets come and go. Family is forever. Remember that, Tess.

JOE

Your mother's right.

TESS

Even a stopped clock....

MARIE

Tony maybe you should try to call Vinnie. See what the problem is. Do something that makes sense with that phone. You got the number?

TONY

Sure, it's in the phone.

MARIE

Joe, come here and taste the baccala. See if you think it's ok.

JOE

I'm sitting here. It's fine.

MIKE

I'll try it if you want, Aunt Marie.

TONY

It's going right to voicemail. Vin, it's Tony. Where are you guys? We're getting worried about you here.

MARIE

Don't say we're worried. I'm not worried.

TONY

So call when you get this. If you aren't already here by then.

CATHERINE

I wonder what could be holding them up all this time.

MARIE

She's probably still crumpling up the potato chips on that casserole she always brings.

TESS

The green bean one. I love that. And nothing died to make it.

MARIE

Except my taste buds.

CATHERINE

What's wrong with you today, Marie. You're never this crabby.

MARIE

I'm not crabby. I'm just thinking. Look at us, Catherine. Eight people. Christmas Eve and eight people. There used to be twenty of us at least. And there were kids. Remember how Aunt Tootie would play the piano. And everybody would sing. They all should be here.

TESS

Tootie died, Ma. Cut her a break.

JOE

I like the casserole.

MARIE

What'd you say, Joe?

JOE

The green bean casserole. I like it.

MARIE

It's ok at Thanksgiving with turkey. Everything's bland. But it's not for Christmas Eve. It doesn't go with the fishes.

JOE

It's ok with the fish.

MARIE

It's not Italian.

TESS

There we go.

MARIE

What? I'm just saying.

TESS

Aunt Peony isn't Italian.

MARIE

I was talking about the casserole.

JOE

Peony can cook Italian. She makes a great linguine in clam sauce.

MARIE

Then she should bring that. One less fish for me to make.

CATHERINE

Marie, you don't have to knock yourself out with the seven fishes.

MARIE

We've done it all our lives. Momma did it for us.

CATHERINE

I'm not saying give it up. Just a couple less fish maybe.

MARIE

There isn't much left that goes back to the old country anymore except the food.

MIKE

You know they don't do the seven fishes in Italy.

TONY

Of course they do.

MIKE

I asked about it when I was there on business last year. Then I looked it up. It's an American thing. I'm not saying it isn't important to keep up the tradition. But it's not from the old country.

MARIE

Why are we all of a sudden learning all these things I don't want to know.

MIKE

I'm sorry Aunt Marie. I didn't mean to upset you. Let me help you with the calamari.

MARIE

I'm not upset. Tony call them again. It's almost nine.

TESS

Aunt Peony's Polish, right? I mean Polish American.

JOE

Yeah. She was Sophie Majewski when Vinnie met her. Beautiful girl. Blond hair, blue eyes. Very popular.

MARIE

Are you calling, Tone, or what?

TONY

Dialing now.

TESS

Wait. You mean Peony isn't her real name.

TONY

Still voicemail.

MARIE

Of course not. Who'd name a kid Peony. It's Sophie.

TESS

So where did Peony come from?

MARIE

I knew once but I don't remember. Do you know, Joe?

MIKE

I know. When she was a little kid she was fat. And one day her older sister said she was round. Like a peony bush. You know how those things are. It just stuck.

TESS

So they bullied the little fat girl. Nice.

CATHERINE

Nobody thought of things like that as bullying in those days. It was playful.

MARIE

Your generation is so sensitive. Honest to god. You take offense at everything.

TESS

Well I think if I were a little kid and someone told me I was as fat as a peony bush it would hurt my feelings.

MIKE

She told me it was a term of affection. She loved her big sister.

TESS

How do you know all this stuff?

MIKE

We had lunch one day. I wanted to get the family history.

MARIE

Well she's not exactly family.

JOE

She's been married to your brother almost 40 years, Marie.

MARIE

Yeah, well sure but I just meant not blood family.

TESS

When I think about my aunts and uncles they're just my aunts and uncles. I never think about who got born in and who married in.

JOE

That's how it should be.

TESS

I'm getting hungry, ma.

MARIE

Here. I made those kale patties for you. And Mikey I know you like them, too.

MIKE

Thanks, Aunt Marie.

CATHERINE

If we don't start pretty soon we'll never make midnight mass.

MARIE

We can't start without Vinnie and Peony.

JOE

You guys remember that movie where there's this Jewish family and the whole family was waiting for the brother who always cut the turkey. And he was so late and everybody was getting mad. It was by that guy who always sets his movies in Baltimore.

TESS

The guy who did Diner.

TONY

Siri, what is the movie about.....

JOE

No, Tony. Don't tell me. I can remember this.

MIKE

I know. It's.....

MARIE

Let your uncle work on this one, Mike. His brain needs the exercise. He'll get it. We don't need to know everything right away all the time.

JOE

Keep talking about something else. It'll come to me.

TONY

I've got a good midnight mass story.

CATHERINE

Not the Tallulah Bankhead story again, Tony.

TESS

What's a Tallulah Bankhead?

TONY

See, the kids don't know the story. Tallulah Bankhead was an old movie star. She was very glamorous. *(He does a Tallulah Bankhead imitation as he speaks)* She'd wear these slinky dresses and use a long cigarette holder and she spoke slowly in this deep voice. And she always called everybody darling only she said it like dahling. Especially when she drank too much. So anyway, Tallulah had been drinking on Christmas Eve and she and her friends decided to go to midnight mass. High mass.

TESS

And she was high.

TONY

Yeah. And so the priest came down the aisle in his fancy vestments waving the censer and Tallulah grabs him by the arm and says, "Dahling I love your gown but your hand-bag is on fire."

(Everyone laughs.)

CATHERINE

Tell them the other one, Tony.

TONY

Oh yeah. That's a good one, too. So Tallulah is out to eat and has to go the ladies room. She's in the stall, see, and she realizes there's no toilet paper. She can see feet in the next stall so she says, "Dahling. I'm in a bit of a pickle here. Would you be a dear and pass me some toilet paper." And the woman in the next stall says, "I'm so sorry. I would but there's none in this stall either." And then there's a pause and Tallulah says, "oh. Two fives for a ten?"

(Everyone laughs)

JOE

Avalon.

TESS

What?

JOE

The movie where the guy is late to cut the turkey. Avalon. Barry Levinson. Great movie.

MARIE

In the movie when he finally gets there do they kill him, because if my dinner ends up in the garbage that's what I'm going to do. If they aren't already out there dead from some accident. Tone, call again.

TONY

Marie, I already left a message.

MARIE

Call!

TONY

I'm calling.

MIKE

Relax, Aunt Marie. I'm sure they're just delayed with the weather.

TONY

Still voicemail.

JOE

In the movie they go ahead and have someone else cut the turkey and then when the guy whose job it is to cut the turkey finally gets there he sees they didn't wait for him and he storms out. And it starts a whole family feud.

TESS

So I guess we'd better wait. The last thing this family needs is a feud. Plus we always start with the blessing we do with that Polish Christmas wafer Aunt Peony brings.

MIKE

It's called oplatki. It goes all the way back to the tenth century in Poland.

TESS

Honest to god when did you get to be such a wise ass about everything.

MIKE

What? I just think this stuff from history is interesting. I like to know about the traditions. If I'm going to do something every year, I like to know why I'm doing it.

MARIE

It always feels weird to me that it's just like the Eucharist.

JOE

It's not consecrated. So it's just unleavened bread. Not Jesus.

MARIE

It still seems disrespectful a little.

CATHERINE

Now you're being silly, Marie.

JOE

You know your sister won't even take the host in her hand at communion. Makes the priest put it right on her tongue. Like in the old days.

MARIE

You say old days like it's a terrible thing.

CATHERINE

I'm just glad they changed the fasting so now it's only an hour before.

TONY

I'm glad they changed the meat on Fridays rule.

TESS

So it goes from being a mortal sin to no sin at all. What sense is that.

MIKE

Remember that George Carlin routine. Are there still Catholics in purgatory

MIKE and TESS

doing time on a meat rap? *(He and TESS laugh. The others do not.)*

TESS

I thought the church got rid of purgatory.

MARIE

It did not.

(There is an awkward silence.)

JOE

If I were you kids I'd change the subject.

MIKE

Well, I was going to wait till everybody was here, but maybe now would be a good time. *(As he exits and quickly returns with packages).* I've got a little gift for everybody.

MARIE

We don't do gifts now.

MIKE

Just this one, Aunt Marie. I'm excited to give it to you.

(CATHERINE wipes her hands on a dishtowel, MARIE wipes hers on her apron and both come downstage with the others. Everyone starts unwrapping their gifts. Their faces go from wide smiles to something less than enthusiasm. They look at each other a little quizzically)

MIKE

They're DNA tests! It's easy. You just have to spit into this thing here and then you send it off.

MARIE

So did you spend a lot of money on this, Mikey?

JOE

It's a gift, Marie.

MIKE

(To MARIE) I got them especially for you. You always care so much about family.

MARIE

It's just that whatever is going to kill me, I'd like it to be a surprise.

MIKE

Oh, no, Auntie. This isn't one of those that tells you about genetic predispositions. It just shows you where your family came from.

TONY

Oh, I love this, Mike. Should we do them now? Do we just spit into this thing here?

MIKE

Don't do it now, Dad. There's some things in there you need to read first.

JOE

This is very thoughtful, Mike, but I'm not blood to you. You didn't need to do this for me.

MIKE

Yeah, I know, but I figured you might get a kick out of it. I got one for Aunt Peony, too. She's already done some of her family history. I work with a guy who reads Polish and he's helping her with documents she got from Poland.

TONY

I've been reading about this stuff. Twice I've seen where someone has written in to one of those advice columns because like they were contacted by a stranger who said they were a half brother.

CATHERINE

Or that the guy they thought was their father, wasn't.

MARIE

Why would you want to know that stuff. We should leave people their secrets.

CATHERINE

Well, I think we're pretty safe. Ma would've killed Pa if he'd fooled around.

TESS

Don't forget that can go both ways. Grandma was a pretty hot number as I recall.

MARIE

Therese Marie!

TESS

I'm just saying, I've seen some of those old pictures of her. Like the one where she's leaning up against that roadster.

MIKE

And she's wearing the tank top.

TESS

With no bra.

JOE

If you're worried about funny genes showing up who you should be thinking about is your grandfather, Marie.

TESS

So great grandpa was a player?

MARIE

No. He wasn't a player. Where do you get this stuff, Joe?

JOE

Well, you know how he died.

MARIE

He fell out of a tree. Ma said he was trimming a tree.

JOE

Vinnie told me the tree was outside his girlfriend's house and the old man was going out the window when the husband was coming in the door.

MIKE

Hey. Wasn't I named after him?

MARIE

I'm going to kill that Vinnie.

TESS

If he ever gets here.

MARIE

Tone, you...

TONY

Yeah I know, Marie. I'm calling again. *(Everyone stands attentively as he calls.)* Peony! I got Peony. *(TONY relays to the group what Peony is saying.)* Peony where you guys at? There was an accident.

(MARIE and CATHERINE cross themselves.)

MIKE

Are they ok? Put them on speaker, Dad.

(TONY pushes a couple of buttons on the phone. Silence. Long pause as they all stare at the phone. Phone rings and TONY picks up. It is not on speaker.)

TONY

It was me, Peen. I hit the wrong thing. You know with my fat fingers I guess. So what's the story? *(Pause)* They're fine. A little damage to the car but not bad. It's drivable. They had to wait to make a police report. That's good, Peony. Yeah. Sure.

MARIE

Ask how they are? Are they hurt?

TONY

She said they're fine.

MARIE

They had an accident. How can they be fine.

TONY

Marie wants to know are you sure you're ok. *(Pause)* Peony says she'll tell you all about it when they get here. They're not even a block away.

MARIE

They're still coming?

TONY

So you guys are still coming? She says of course they're coming. It's Christmas Eve. They gotta come. OK, Peen. We'll see you in a coupla minutes.

JOE

Tell them pull up the drive. It's better with the snow.

TONY

Peen. Joe says tell Vinnie pull in the drive. Oh, good. Ok. I'm hangin up then. They're pulling in now. They were even closer than she thought. I need to charge my phone, Joe. Where can I plug it in? I got the charger.

(JOE shows TONY where to plug in his phone and MARIE and CATHERINE fuss with the food. The doorbell rings. Everybody rushes to the door. MIKE gets there first and PEONY and VINNIE enter. They are bundled up and shaking off snow.)

PEONY

Where can I put my boots, Marie. Vinnie, be careful with your wet things.

TESS

Mike and I got it.

MARIE

Don't worry about the snow. My god, with what you've been through. Come in and sit down. What happened? Are you sure you're ok? Whaddya want? Some tea, maybe. A little shot of something? For the cold.

PEONY

Just maybe let me sit for a minute.

JOE

What happened, Vin?

VINNIE

It wasn't our fault. We were stopped at the light. The one at Belmont and Harlem.

TONY

What were you doing on Belmont? Diversey is better.

JOE

Not in bad weather, Tony. I always...

MARIE

Just let them tell us what happened for the love of god.

VINNIE

We're just sitting there waiting for the light and wham, this guy in a BMW goes right into our back end.

TONY

Good thing you were in the Lincoln.

VINNIE

You think I'm gonna take Peony's Corolla on a night like this. But we still got some back end damage.

PEONY

Oh, Marie. I had the green bean casserole in the trunk. It's all over the place in there.

MARIE

Oh no! Not the casserole!

PEONY

I feel so bad. I know you look forward to it.

TESS

It's ok, Aunt Peony. We've got plenty of food.

MARIE

The food! What are we going to do about dinner?

TESS

Eat it?

MARIE

But if we eat dinner now it'll be too late to make midnight mass.

VINNIE

Geeze, I'm so sorry.

MIKE

It wasn't your fault, Uncle Vinnie. Will the dinner hold up if we go to mass first, Aunt Marie?

MARIE

It won't be so good. I've been nursing it along there to keep it good but I'd have to put it all in the refrigerator and then try to reheat it.

CATHERINE

But you put so much work into it.

MIKE

It looks like we've got a choice to make. We go to midnight mass and have a reheated dinner on what will actually be Christmas Day, not Christmas Eve. Or we sit down and enjoy the meal and go to mass tomorrow.

MARIE

I don't like either of those.

CATHERINE

Marie, we should eat. Everyone's hungry. The food is still good.

MARIE

From the time we were little girls we always went to midnight mass on Christmas Eve. Even when mama was sick that year, she got up and went with us.

CATHERINE

And the year the police picked up Grandpa Mike, dad bribed the cop and got him out in time just so we could all make midnight mass.

MARIE

It's always been a rule. We gotta go.

JOE

(Putting his arm around MARIE) Amore, listen to me. You listening? Because this is important.

MARIE

I'm listening, Joe.

JOE

Remember in the Bible when they asked Jesus about what rules are the important ones? And what did he say. He said, there's only two you got to pay attention to. Love God. Love each other. With all the other rules you get a little wiggle room.

MARIE

(Takes JOE's face between her hands, squeezes it and kisses him on the lips.)
Let's eat!

PEONY

(Holding it up) I saved the oplatki. I had it in my purse.

(The family begins sharing the oplatki wishing each other the merriest of Christmases. MARIE and PEONY share theirs and hug. Slow fade out)

