

**UNDER THE DEUCE**

by

**Richard Kuntzevich**

**ACT 1            SCENE 1**

*A sparsely furnished studio apartment located over the Lazano family delicatessen in present day New York City. Angie and Father Tom sit on either side of SAL in simple chairs. They stare at him in disbelief.*

**ANGIE:**            You're telling me my husband didn't get Last Rites?

**SAL:**                That's what I'm telling you.

**ANGIE:**            So tell me, why didn't my husband get his Last Rites?

**SAL:**                There wasn't enough time.

**ANGIE:**            Not enough time? What do you mean not enough time?

**FATHER TOM:** This is hard on all of us, Sal, so why don't you tell us where this happen?

**SAL:**                In Rome.

**FATHER TOM:** Yes, yes, I know but exactly where. In the hotel, in the street, a restaurant?

**SAL:**                No, at the Vatican.

**ANGIE:**            The Vatican? Where the Pope lives?

**SAL:**                Yup, the Pope's house.

**ANGIE:**            Leo drops dead inside the Vatican and he can't get Last Rites?

**SAL:**                I couldn't find a priest. There were none around.

**ANGIE:**            You were in the Vatican; all you hadda do is stick your head out the window and yell for one.

**FATHER TOM:** Priests are like cops; they're never around when you need one.

**ANGIE:** Everyday bums drop dead in the streets and people rush all over themselves getting a priest. My husband passes away in the one place where you would think a thousand priests would be available to administer Last Rites. I don't understand, I don't know how this could've happened.

**SAL:** It wouldn't have helped if there were one anyway.

**ANGIE:** Why not?

**SAL:** He was dead before he kissed the floor, that's why.

**ANGIE:** How do you know that?

**SAL:** I just know.

**ANGIE:** Tell me.

**SAL:** I rather not, I don't think you want to hear the details.

**ANGIE:** Don't tell me what you think, tell me how my husband died.

**SAL:** When you die, the first thing to go is control of the bowels. He soiled his pants and stained the carpet. That's how I know. While I was trying to help him, some rat-faced bureaucrat was yelling about the mess he made. I had to pay two hundred fifty euros for dry cleaning before they called for help. By the time a priest showed up ... it was too late.

**ANGIE:** He didn't get Last Rites because he soiled a carpet? That's crazy talk. Do you believe that, Father Tom?

**FATHER TOM:** Unfortunately I do. Those penny-pinching grubbers always have their hands out ... never miss a beat, do they?

**ANGIE:** Do you know what this means? You have any idea? My husband was denied the chance to make peace with God. You have to make peace with God, no matter whom you are; otherwise, your soul is condemned to hell. Hell, you hear me? Condemned to hell. Because of you he can't get a funeral mass.

**SAL:** (to *FATHER TOM*) That true?

**FATHER TOM:** I'm afraid to say it is. What were both of you doing in the Vatican in the first place? It's extremely difficult to get a Papal appointment. Did you attend a mass?

**SAL:** There was no mass; he had an appointment.

**ANGIE:** He broke bread with the Holy Father?

**SAL:** Yes, he broke bread with the Pope.

**ANGIE:** Why didn't you tell me they met?

**SAL:** You didn't know?

**ANGIE:** No, I didn't know. Did you see him meet the Pope?

**SAL:** Not exactly. I was in a waiting room just outside where they met.

**FATHER TOM:** So how do you know they met?

**SAL:** The Vatican isn't Vegas where you got a thousand Elvis' walking around. There's only one Pope in Rome and when his secretary tells you that the Holy Father is ready to see you, you go.

**ANGIE:** So my husband met the Holy Father. How long did the meeting last?

**SAL:** I don't know for sure, it's all a big blur at this point.

**ANGIE:** Think, I have to know.

**SAL:** At least twenty minutes, no more than thirty. It had to be around noon, I remember hearing church bells.

**FATHER TOM:** Ah, they ring them at a drop of a hat ... could have been anytime. Tell me, what inspired your husband to seek an audience with the Pope?

**ANGIE:** Doesn't every good Catholic want to meet him?

**FATHER TOM:** Yes, but most are content to see him from afar.

**ANGIE:** All this happened after the meeting?

**SAL:** Yes, immediately after.

**ANGIE:** What was his mood like?

**SAL:** Quiet, kinda reflective. He was definitely moved by his meeting.

**FATHER TOM:** He wouldn't have been normal if he weren't. Tell us what happened.

**SAL:** He came out of the meeting all-quiet like. I asked him how did it go and he says nothing. All he did was shake his head and pace the room. He stopped, looked outta the window and turns to me with this quizzical look on his face. The next thing I know he's on the floor. I checked for a pulse but got nothing.

**ANGIE:** Did he say anything?

**SAL:** Yeah, he did.

**ANGIE:** Are you going to tell us? Come on, I'm pulling teeth here. What were his last words?

**SAL:** Son of a bitch.

**ANGIE:** I beg your pardon. Those were his last words? Son of a bitch?

*SAL nods.*

**FATHER TOM:** He said that in the Vatican? Are you sure?

**SAL:** That he did, loud and clear as the bells of Saint Peter's Square.

**FATHER TOM:** What would make someone who just met the Pontiff say that? That should have been a very happy moment for him.

**FATHER TOM:** Did he spit it out as if he was angry or did he say it softly, almost like a whisper, as if contemplating something?

**SAL:** What difference does it make how he said it?

**FATHER TOM:** It makes a big difference, I'm afraid to say. I refuse to believe he was speaking about the Holy Father.

**ANGIE:** He wasn't talking about the Pope. If he said son of a bitch then he was surprised.

**FATHER TOM:** Surprised? That's hardly the language to use when seeing the Holy Father.

**ANGIE:** My husband was extremely precise with his language. He never used those words to disparage anyone. He used them when something caught him off guard or came right out of the blue. Something made him say it. What was it?

**SAL:** I have no idea. If something surprised him then it happened in the meeting.

**ANGIE:** He more than likely confessed his sins to the Holy Father. What do you think, Father Tom?

**FATHER TOM:** More than likely that's what happened but I can't say for sure.

**ANGIE:** I have to know what surprised him. If he was humbled, overcome with emotion, or awe struck, then he would have been speechless. That I could accept. But surprised? No, that is totally unacceptable.

**FATHER TOM:** I'm afraid that is something that we'll have to speculate about.

**ANGIE:** No, you don't understand. I have to know. Can't you call someone in the Archdiocese and ask them to make some inquiries in Rome? Perhaps someone was present.

**FATHER TOM:** I'm afraid there is no way that we can ever find out.

**ANGIE:** Have you ever heard of anything like this in all your years?

**FATHER TOM:** Not really. Let's assume that the Holy Father heard your husband's confession. If he did then he gave him penance. In light of what happened, he never had the opportunity to carry it out.

**SAL:** Where are you going with this?

**FATHER TOM:** His choice of language right after the meeting indicates his state of mind was not truly repentive. It begs the question; did he really make peace with God?

**ANGIE:** And if he didn't?

**FATHER TOM:** Like you said, his soul is condemned to hell.

*ANGIE covers her ears, shakes her head.*

**ANGIE:** Never! Never! How in God's name can you say that?

**FATHER TOM:** I say it most reluctantly and with a heavy heart.

**ANGIE:** There's no way in hell my husband's in hell. Have you told us everything? Are you sure there is nothing else we should know?

**SAL:** No, that's it.

*ANGIE rummages through her bag and removes postcards.*

**ANGIE:** Can you tell me about these?

**SAL:** Oh, good, you got the postcards already.

**ANGIE:** Yes, I did, as you can see.

**FATHER TOM:** Postcards always arrive two weeks after you've returned and you've already told all of your good stories. Never fails.

**ANGIE:** I'm a bit confused; perhaps you can set me straight. Usually postcards say wish you were here, or having fun, the weather's great, but these say nothing like that at all. This one says Linguini a

la Fellini. *(She puts on reading glasses)* This one says Zupa Inglese a la Dean Martin. This one here says Old Fashioned Meatballs and Spaghetti a la Sinatra. That's it, nothing else. It's like getting a postcard from a crazy person.

*(Angie removes her glasses)*

**FATHER TOM:** Come on; tell us everything, makes no sense doling it out piecemeal.

**SAL:** They were supposed to be a surprise.

**ANGIE:** I think I've gotten that already.

**SAL:** Before we went to the Vatican we went to a lot of restaurants. One night we stumbled upon one that he couldn't get enough of – a joint called Vinny's New York. Some guy from Jersey retired in Rome, got bored and opened a restaurant. It's one of the hottest places in the city.

**ANGIE:** Let me get this straight. You went all the way to Rome to go gaga over some restaurant a bocce gallop from New Jersey opened?

**SAL:** I'm tellin' ya, you would have loved it too. We went there a few nights in a row and each night, on the way back to the hotel, Leo's eyes would bug out of his head with possibilities. He put one arm around my shoulders and kept saying we gotta do this, gotta do that. To make his point he'd poked me in the chest. I'm telling you I'm still black and blue. I hadn't seen him that excited in a long time.

**ANGIE:** What did this place have that made him so excited?

**SAL:** The menu is full of dishes named after celebrities.

**FATHER TOM:** I like places that do that. I always wondered are the sandwiches named after the celebrity because they like that particular sandwich or does the sandwich represent something about the celebrity or does - -

**ANGIE:** Please let Sal continue.

**SAL:** It's the oldest trick in the book but it works big time. There's Fettuccine Puttanesca a la Frankie Avalon, Angel Hair Arrabiata a la Anna Magnani, and, Bomba Neapolitan a la Sophia Loren. He's also named dishes after the local politicians and actors. It's pretty sharp.

**ANGIE:** That's the surprise? Naming meatballs after dead celebrities?

**SAL:** They aren't all dead.

**ANGIE:** Why send these to me? I'm a pretty good cook, I've never needed any help in the kitchen.

**SAL:** They weren't for you; they were for the new restaurant.

**ANGIE:** New restaurant? What new restaurant?

**SAL:** Leo was going to surprise you when we got back by opening a new place. He was going to call it Angie's – after you. From the minute we got on the plane at JFK that's all he talked about. He couldn't wait to tell you, said your face would light up like a Christmas tree.

**ANGIE:** That's my Leo.

**SAL:** He didn't want any old recipes either; they had to be from the old country. He was adamant about that. If we had a meal that we'd like we would go to the kitchen and talk to the chef. We would write them down on the postcards and in the morning, before we even had our cappuccino, we mailed them.

**ANGIE:** He had a heart bigger than the Sicilian pies you get over at Strombolis in Bay Ridge.

**SAL:** You're right about that.

**ANGIE:** For your sake, he better be in heaven. The whole family is upset with you. You were supposed to take care of him, make sure everything went smoothly and that nothing would happen while you were in Italy. You didn't do that; you disappointed all of us. It's on you that Leo is not in heaven.

**SAL:** Aw, come on, there's no way you can put this on me.

**ANGIE:** Didn't you promise me that you'd watch after him when you both left?

**SAL:** I did.

**ANGIE:** And did you? Seems like you didn't.

**SAL:** What are you talking about? I made all the travel arrangements, all the hotel and dinner reservations. All Leo had to do was wake up and go. He didn't have to think about anything.

**ANGIE:** All I know is that you're here and Leo is not. He better not be in hell, that's all I'm saying. If he is then you're going there yourself and telling him way. There are a lot of people angry with you and I cannot be responsible for what they might do. If you don't fix this, you better beware of malocchio. If people start cursing you then I'm afraid I can't help you.

**SAL:** Come on, there's gotta be something you can do.

**ANGIE:** This is what I'm going to do. I'm driving to every church in Brooklyn and light every candle I can find. They don't call Brooklyn the City of Churches for nothing. Then I'm heading over to Queens, to the Bronx, Staten Island and do the same thing. In Manhattan, I'm going to Saint Patrick's Cathedral, the big house. When I'm done, I'll start all over again and have masses said in his name. When I'm through my Leo will be where he belongs, with the Heavenly Father. I don't have time to go to a cash machine, gimme some money.

*(ANGIE stands, stomps her foot and thrusts out her hand. SAL hands her cash.)*

**SAL:** That's all I have.

**ANGIE:** That'll do.

**FATHER TOM:** Sorry, Angie, but the collection plate has been fairly light lately.

**ANGIE:** Not to worry, Father Tom. As God is my Witness, Angelina Teresa Lazano will not rest a minute until my husband is in heaven. Not a minute. And God help anyone who tries to stop me.

*ANGIE exits.*

**SAL:** She doesn't know, does she?

**FATHER TOM:** Know what?

**SAL:** She still thinks you're a priest.

**FATHER TOM:** You're right, I haven't told her. Besides, I don't see the harm.

**SAL:** You don't?

**FATHER TOM:** I can see in her eyes that she knows but she's polite enough never to mention it. She continues to ask me for spiritual guidance and I am most happy to provide it. I am still a man of God, despite what others think.

**SAL:** You never felt the need to tell her?

**FATHER TOM:** Do you realize what it's like telling people you've been excommunicated in today's world? People assume the worst. They don't believe me when I tell them I was bounced because I opposed the updating of the Council of Trent. I still believe that establishing new sins was not the best thing to do when there are bigger issues affecting the Faithful. I advocated decreasing the list of sins. I stood

up for the parishioners and look where it got me. Tossed out into the street like a piece of trash.

**SAL:** Aw right, I see your point. Tell me, this stuff Angie's doing, you know, lighting candles, saying masses ... is that gonna work?

**FATHER TOM:** It can if he is in Purgatory. Each candle lit, each mass said reduces time that he's there.

**SAL:** So there's reason to hope.

**FATHER TOM:** Not exactly. I don't want to mislead you, but I believe he has some of the top ten on his soul.

**SAL:** Top ten?

**FATHER TOM:** The Ten Commandments. If you have any of them on your soul then you're condemned straight to hell, there's no way out. Let me be vulgar, if you will, just for the moment. You can drink a glass of water, stand on your head and blow bubbles out your butt and it'll do you no good. You're never getting out.

**SAL:** Do you believe this? I know the Lazano's a long time and they're dead serious. They really think I'm responsible for this.

**FATHER TOM:** I wouldn't worry about this if I were standing in your shoes. Six months from now everything will be forgotten. Mark my words.

**SAL:** You're not, I am, and I don't have six months. I didn't even want to go on that stupid trip; I'm too old for jet lag. This is the thanks I get.

**FATHER TOM:** It's not as hopeless as you think.

**SAL:** That's easy for you to say.

**FATHER TOM:** I say it because I may have a solution for this particular situation. That is if you don't mind an old broken down priest showing you the way.

**SAL:** Please, with all due respect, how are you gonna do this?

**FATHER TOM:** I know people who deal with situations like this. People who navigate through the deep shadows of the Church. I'm still on good terms with them.

**SAL:** Is this kosher?

**FATHER TOM:** As kosher as Hebrew National but the offer is about to fly out the window.

**SAL:** Okay, okay, please.

**FATHER TOM:** There are a few conditions. No matter what, if I say do something, you do it. No questions asked, no hesitating.

**SAL:** Got it.

**FATHER TOM:** When this is all said and done, you keep your mouth shut. Think you can do that?

**SAL:** That I can do.

**FATHER TOM:** According to the grapevine, the individual I speak of is presently in town. I'll reach out to him. If he is, indeed, in town then I'm sure he'll see us.

**SAL:** Good, I'm not feeling so hopeless right now.

**FATHER TOM:** Ah, don't get your hopes up so fast.

**SAL:** Why's that?

**FATHER TOM:** This person can be a bit of a pill. The whole thing hinges on what kind of mood we find him in.

**SAL:** That's just wonderful.

**FATHER TOM:** This is akin to bumming a cigarette. Beggars can't be choosy, can they now?

**SAL:** No, they can't.

**FATHER TOM:** There's one more thing. If you don't do exactly as told, there's a good chance of you being left behind. And if that happens there will be nothing that I can do. Nothing. Understand? You'll be left behind for Eternity.

**SAL:** Eternity? That's a long time. Where we going?

**FATHER TOM:** Hell. We're going to hell.

**BLACKOUT    END OF SCENE 1**