

Keep the Faith and Pass the Fettuccine
by Bart Lovins

*Kentucky Theatre Association's
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Keep the Faith and Pass the Fettuccine

CHARACTERS *(in order of appearance)*

- HOSTESS – offstage voice, pre-recorded
- RUTH – elderly mother of Joyce
- MIRIAM – Ruth’s younger sister and Joyce’s aunt
- JOYCE – Ruth’s estranged daughter
- LEVI – Joyce’s boyfriend

Synopsis – Keep the Faith and Pass the Fettuccine

When an estranged daughter invites her Southern family to dinner at Louisville’s Old Spaghetti Factory, she hopes to quietly introduce them to her new boyfriend, Levi – an affable, culturally Jewish man. But the six-course meal turns into a full-blown reckoning as clashing cultures, hidden heritage, and long-held family secrets bubble to the surface. From mistaken religious assumptions to whispered revelations about ancestry, the evening unravels into a heartfelt exploration of identity, belief, forgiveness, and the unspoken threads that bind us. What starts as a simple dinner becomes a transformative journey of rediscovery, laughter, and acceptance.

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A projected image of Louisville's Levy Building from the 1900s transforms into that of Louisville's Old Spaghetti Factory from the 1980s as the lights dim to "Mambo Italiano," sung by Rosemary Clooney.

*RECORDING: A girl went back to Napoli
Because she missed the scenery
The native dances and the charming songs
But wait a minute
Something's wrong*

Text overlaps the new image: "The Old Spaghetti Factory has been proudly serving deliciously affordable multi-course meals in Louisville at the old Levy Building since 1985. We invite your family to join us for a memorable dining experience."

The text dissolves as the screen image shifts to the restaurant's lobby. The title "aperitivo" appears over the lobby image. The text fades as the lights rise.

Popular Italian American music of the 1950s underscores throughout the first scene. Two elderly southern ladies sit on an overstuffed Victorian sofa. Their expressions betray both disdain and awe at the restaurant's opulence. Both sisters wear thick bifocal glasses, identical heirloom rings, and no makeup.

The soft-spoken older sister, RUTH, rarely laughs aloud, but her face ripples alive with an infectious smile. She carries a small strapless clutch that holds only the essentials for the day ahead. Her conservative attire, though outdated, is immaculate, from the high-collared lavender blouse to the neatly pressed ankle-length purple skirt and the freshly polished low-heeled shoes. Her gracefully styled, thin golden hair resembles a cloud of finely spun cotton candy.

MIRIAM, in contrast, laughs often and exudes a gentle air of mischievous eccentricity. She opts for comfort in a voluminous knitted sweater paired with a denim skirt and orthopedic shoes. A large piece of costume jewelry pinned to her sweater is the apex of her fashion sense. Though lacking in style, her cropped hair speaks to her no-nonsense approach to life. Across her body, she carries an ample handbag, prepared for any eventuality.

At rise, MIRIAM has nodded off, but RUTH's eyes dart nervously from the imagined other patrons hanging about the lobby to the front doors as if awaiting a bus instead of a table. THEY talk with the ease of sisters who have spent sixty years or more finishing each other's sentences.

HOSTESS: *(Offstage.)* LeBlanc, party of three. LeBlanc, your table's ready.

(MIRIAM bolts upright at the sound of the HOSTESS and straightens her glasses as RUTH watches the invisible LeBlanc party exit past them to be seated.)

MIRIAM: Guess she's not called for us?

(RUTH shakes her head.)

MIRIAM: *(Looking around the lobby.)* Joyce?

(RUTH shakes her head.)

MIRIAM: *(Checking her watch.)* Would've thought she'd be here by now, what with their hotel bein' just this side of town.

RUTH: *(Nodding.)* Drove right past it ourselves.

MIRIAM: Thanks again for drivin'.

RUTH: *(Smiling.)* No bother.

MIRIAM: You know I woulda, but once the sun sets, it's hard to keep my VW in the lines.

RUTH: *(speaking from firsthand experience.)* Oh, I know.

(Pause as MIRIAM squints at the gaudy opulence surrounding them and sneakily checks her bra to see how many folded bills she remembered to bring.)

MIRIAM: Awful fancy, ain't it?

RUTH: *(Taking in her surroundings with polite disdain.)* That's one word for it.

(MIRIAM pauses to notice the music as she counts her money.)

MIRIAM: Music's nice.

RUTH: *(Distracted.)* 'Spose so.

MIRIAM: Brings back mem'ries, don't it? Say, who's your favorite Eye-tal-yeen singer?

RUTH: Hmm? Oh, I don't recollect. Dean Martin, maybe. You?

MIRIAM: *(Fondly.)* Rosemary Clooney.

RUTH: Oh, yes! Born an' bred right here.

MIRIAM: (*Proudly.*) Yes'm.

RUTH: Wait, is she Eye-tal-yeen?

MIRIAM: You know, I never really thought about it.

HOSTESS: (*Offstage.*) Hello, Leicester, party of three. Leicester, your table's ready.

(*Pause as THEY watch the invisible Leicester party go past to be seated.*)

MIRIAM: What do you think this'll run?

RUTH: Hard to say.

MIRIAM: (*Fearing she may not have brought enough cash.*) Now, don't you let Joyce talk us into lettin' her pay.

RUTH: Oh, mercy, no. (*Patting her clutch.*) I got cash and my checkbook.

MIRIAM: Now, Ruth, that's awful nice of you, but I got this. You paid last time we went out.

RUTH: (*Shaking her head.*) I don't think so, Miriam.

MIRIAM: You did. Doncha 'member, when we went to the DQ, an' you got the chocolate soft serve?

RUTH: Oh, that's right.

MIRIAM: An' I got the double dipped 'nilla.

RUTH: An' I got an' ice cream headache that liked to never go away.

MIRIAM: That's right.

RUTH: But then when we got in the car, you went an' slipped five bucks into my purse, you little rascal, so it's my turn to pay.

MIRIAM: Oh, you found that, huh?

RUTH: (*No fooling her.*) Yes'm, I did.

MIRIAM: Well, now I only did that cuz the time afore you left a ten in my coat pocket after we went to Cracker Barrel.

RUTH: Oh, you found that, did you?

MIRIAM: *(Nobody's fool either. Bumping RUTH with her shoulder.)* Yep, I did, you sneaky devil.

(Pause.)

MIRIAM: *(Confused.)* So, whose turn is it?

HOSTESS: *(Offstage.)* O'Ruorke? O'Ruorke? Table for ten for O'Ruorke?

(Pause as THEY pull their feet tight to the sofa, fearing THEY might get trampled on as THEY watch the large invisible O'Ruorke family walk by.)

MIRIAM: Oh my. *(Nudging RUTH with her elbow.)* They're prodigious, aren't they?

RUTH: *(Shaking her head and chuckling.)* Hard to imagine. Joyce alone was more than I could handle most days.

MIRIAM: *(Nodding.)* Meemaw used to say keepin' track of you, Esther, an' me was 'bout like herdin' cats.

(Pause as lost in her thoughts, RUTH is nonresponsive. MIRIAM mews and acts like a cat, making RUTH smile. The two lean into each other, rub shoulders, and laugh together.)

MIRIAM: *(Sigh.)* Sure do miss her.

RUTH: Meemaw?

MIRIAM: *(Confused.)* Esther.

RUTH: *(With a slight shrug.)* 'Spose I do, too. They sure painted her up nice for the funeral.

(Pause as THEY both nod in silence.)

MIRIAM: *(Wincing suddenly.)* Too much rouge!

RUTH: *(Glad she wasn't alone in noticing.)* Always!

MIRIAM: I know. Hobart & Sons never gets it quite right, do they?

(Pause as THEY both shake their heads and sigh.)

RUTH: Eulogy was fine, though.

MIRIAM: Pastor Daniels keeps 'em at a good clip.

RUTH: *(Nodding.)* Mmm-hmm.

MIRIAM: *(Leaning in.)* Sure am sorry Joyce couldn't make it in for the service.

RUTH: *(Sadly.)* Thank you.

MIRIAM: Then again, maybe it's better to remember how she was in life instead.

RUTH: *(Sphinxlike.)* 'Spose so.

MIRIAM: *(Nodding.)* Mmm-hmm.

RUTH: Remember when Meemaw sent all three of us girls on the train up here all by ourselves?

MIRIAM: *(Shaking her head.)* With nothin' but a note safety pinned to us like we was luggage.

RUTH: Wouldn't do that with children these days.

MIRIAM: Lands no. Might never get returned.

RUTH: Why, I remember drivin' Joyce up here to buy her spring formal when this was the old Leave-eye buildin' an' nearly losin' sight of her the minute we walked through those doors. *(RUTH slaps one hand against the other in a forward motion to demonstrate how fast JOYCE ran.)* Phew! Off she went!

(Pause as THEY laugh.)

RUTH: Now look at this place. It's a dolled-up Eye-tal-yeen restaurant, an' she's off livin' up north. *(Shaking her head.)* Wonder how that happened.

MIRIAM: *(Secretively.)* Fire broke out, I heard tell.

RUTH: Hmmm? Oh! The store?

MIRIAM: *(With a wink and a nod.)* Whole thing went up.

RUTH: Lands!

MIRIAM: One big old tax write-off, they said.

RUTH: *(Shaking her head.)* Shame.

MIRIAM: *(Nodding.)* Downright shame.

HOSTESS: *(Offstage.)* Winchester, party of two. Winchester!

(THEY smile, and pause to watch the passionate, invisible Winchester couple pass by.)

MIRIAM: *(Shocked.)* Oh, Ruth! Don't look now!

RUTH: *(Dismayed.)* Why? What do you mean?

MIRIAM: Mercy, that poor sweet girl.

RUTH: *(Whispering.)* I declare – what!

MIRIAM: J.C. Penney's went an' only sold that gal half a dress.

(THEY laugh.)

RUTH: *(Teasingly elbowing MIRIAM.)* Now, you go on an' behave yourself!

MIRIAM: *(Sighing.)* Oh, to be young an' in love. *(Catching her breath.)* Who's Joyce bringing with her again?

RUTH: *(Sighing heavily.)* Her new boyfriend.

MIRIAM: Boyfriend? Joyce's nigh' on past forty!

RUTH: *(At a loss.)* Well – “man-friend.”

MIRIAM: Eh, I don't much like the sound of that, neither. Suitor?

(RUTH shrugs and nods.)

MIRIAM: What's his name?

(RUTH shrugs and shakes her head.)

MIRIAM: *(Comforting.)* Well, then, I guess we'll just learn all about him together.

RUTH: Said they met in Cambridge, an' ever since they've been... *(RUTH trails off, unable to finish the sentence.)*

MIRIAM: *(Whispered.)* Livin' in sin?

RUTH: *(Sighs.)* Well, courtin' – yes.

MIRIAM: Good. Life's too short.

RUTH: *(Whispering.)* Miriam!

MIRIAM: What? Esther's passed on. It's just you an' me now an' ain't a one of us gettin' no younger.

(RUTH shrugs and nods.)

MIRIAM: An' if'n Joyce's found happiness, I say let's not stand in her way.

(THEY laugh at the thought as THEY finish each other's sentences.)

RUTH: Stand in Joyce's way? She'd like as not run over you –

MIRIAM: No keepin' that one down on the farm –

RUTH: Always on the run –

MIRIAM: To what, I wonder –

RUTH: *(Shaking her head.)* Not to, from.

MIRIAM: Heh?

(JOYCE and LEVI tumble through the front door in a flurry of motion. JOYCE is wind-swept but otherwise perfectly coiffed in a fashionable two-piece pantsuit. LEVI is also a bit disheveled but equally tailored.)

RUTH: *(Anxious but joyful.)* Ope, here she comes.

(RUTH rises gingerly and then cautiously assists MIRIAM up. JOYCE and LEVI speak privately just out of earshot of MIRIAM and RUTH.)

LEVI: *(Seeing RUTH and MIRIAM.)* Joyce, they are adorable.

(JOYCE fixes LEVI's tie.)

JOYCE: Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving. Mother only looks like Betty Crocker – and you never know what Miriam's cooking up.

(JOYCE nervously crosses past LEVI to fix her hair in the reflection of a window.)

JOYCE: Now, remember what I said.

LEVI: *(Following her.)* Avoid religion –

JOYCE: Watch your manners, and no cussing.

(LEVI hugs JOYCE from behind.)

LEVI: Relax. What's the worst that could happen – that they find out I'm Jewish or learn that –

JOYCE: *(Interrupting nervously.)* Can we just let them get to know you before we –

(LEVI reacts.)

JOYCE: *(Turning to him.)* Oh my God. Honey, that's not what I –

LEVI: I know, I do. Believe me. I've heard worse.

JOYCE: It's just that they can be –

LEVI: We'll take things slow. I won't even bring it up.

(THEY share a quick kiss, and JOYCE visibly relaxes.)

LEVI: So, then – politics?

JOYCE: *(Shaking her head with a smile.)* Damn it.

LEVI: *(Admonishing her with a wink.)* No cussing.

(JOYCE and LEVI turn to RUTH and MIRIAM.)

JOYCE: *(A plastered smile playing anxiously across her face.)* Mother! Aunt Miriam!

RUTH: There's my girl!

MIRIAM: Howdy!

(JOYCE hugs RUTH and MIRIAM as LEVI stands to the side, not knowing what else to do.)

RUTH: *(Cheerfully eyeing JOYCE from head to toe.)* My, isn't that outfit – somethin.?'

JOYCE: *(Shaken, she continues.)* Well – well, just look at you two. Why, is that a new dress, Mother?

RUTH: (*Blushing.*) This old thing? I found it in the back of the closet.

JOYCE: Well, you've always looked lovely in lavender.

(*RUTH takes in JOYCE'S outfit.*)

RUTH: (*Smiling.*) I think a lady always looks more presentable in a dress, don't you?

JOYCE: (*Speechless, she changes the subject.*) Sorry to keep you both waiting.

RUTH: I do wish you'd have stayed with me down in Cloverport.

JOYCE: (*Aghast.*) With you? (*Covering.*) In that tiny condo, Mother? Thank you, no. Besides, the hotel is closer to my conference. (*Diverting.*) Miriam, where did you find that brooch?

MIRIAM: At the Bargetown thrift store. They were askin' four dollars for it.

JOYCE: You're kidding!

MIRIAM: (*Proudly.*) If you look close, there's a couple of stones missin', so I Jewed 'em down to a buck fifty.

(*JOYCE glances over her shoulder to see LEVI stifling a laugh.*)

JOYCE: Oh, uhm, yes. Yes, that's quite the deal. Again, I'm so sorry to be running late.

(*Trying to join the conversation, LEVI gestures over his shoulder in the direction they entered.*)

LEVI: Yeah, trying to catch a cab from the hotel was hell –

(*MIRIAM, RUTH, and JOYCE turn to LEVI in reaction to him cursing. LEVI'S over-the-shoulder gesture becomes a feeble attempt at a wave.*)

LEVI: Hell-oh! Hi, I mean.

JOYCE: Stars, where are my manners? Aunt Miriam, Mother, this is Levi [Leave-eye].

LEVI: Ladies, it's so nice to finally meet you. Joyce speaks of you often.

RUTH: (*Having heard nothing about LEVI, pointedly smiles at JOYCE.*) You don't say.

JOYCE: (*Nervously.*) He does!

LEVI: (*Unsure how to respond.*) I do!

JOYCE: He did!

(Pause as RUTH and MIRIAM watch JOYCE and LEVI laugh nervously.)

RUTH: Well, isn't this nice?

(RUTH takes two decisive steps toward LEVI. LEVI backs up two steps in response.)

RUTH: 'Bout time we met then, I 'spect – young man.

JOYCE: *(Embarrassed.)* Mother!

(Smoothing, LEVI extends his slightly shaking hand to RUTH.)

LEVI: Too long not to have met you by now, I agree – ma'am.

(RUTH politely shakes hands with LEVI.)

MIRIAM: *(Jumping in.)* Why thank you for havin' us over to your buildin' for supper.

(RUTH and MIRIAM laugh.)

LEVI: Sorry?

RUTH: Miriam an' I were just recollectin' how we used to come up here when we were little.

MIRIAM: An' what a treat it was after the long train ride up from Cloverport.

JOYCE: Oh, that's right, this was the old Leh-vee Building, wasn't it?

LEVI: Levy? Oh, ha, no, I'm Levi, not – that is, my first name is –

RUTH: Levi? *(Approvingly.)* Why, that's right, biblical.

LEVI: *(Lightly, with a knowing glance to JOYCE.)* More Old Testament than New.

(JOYCE smacks LEVI in the arm.)

RUTH: *(Eyes him carefully and nods.)* You don't say. What church do they attend –?

(Unsure how to answer, LEVI begins to stammer.)

JOYCE: *(Jumping in quickly with a laugh.)* Levi's family was – very devout. They took their faith very seriously, didn't they, sweetheart?

(JOYCE grabs his hand and squeezes it tightly.)

LEVI: *(Wincing with a forced smile.)* Nnyahh! In their own way, yes!

RUTH: *(Still eyeing him, unconvinced.)* Mmm-hmm.

MIRIAM: *(Teasing.)* Why, that makes you the third son of Jacob.

LEVI: I'm sorry? Jacob, who?

MIRIAM: *(Loudly with excitement.)* Repentant Sinners Love Jesus –

JOYCE: *(Amused and embarrassed.)* Aunt Miriam!

(JOYCE looks around to see if MIRIAM is drawing attention. All LEVI can do is laugh. RUTH smiles and turns to MIRIAM to offer help.)

MIRIAM: *(Recalling the rest suddenly and proudly without help.)* Do Not Give Animals In Zoos –

MIRIAM, RUTH, and JOYCE: Jelly Beans.

(JOYCE, MIRIAM, and RUTH laugh.)

LEVI: *(Taken aback.)* Uhm. Sorry, what?

MIRIAM: I'll be. I ain't thoughta' that in years.

RUTH: *(Shaking her head.)* Lands, not since Joyce was in bible study.

JOYCE: *(Laughing and turning to LEVI.)* It's a Mnemonic.

LEVI: *(Feigns understanding.)* Oh!

JOYCE: We were taught to remember Jacob's sons in birth order by the first letter of each name.

RUTH: *(Explains.)* Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin.

MIRIAM: *(Holding up her fingers as she counts, starting with her thumb.)* Reuben – *(Index finger.)* Simeon – *(Obliviously holding out her middle finger at Levi.)* Levi! Levi's the third son of Jacob.

HOSTESS: *(Offstage.)* Johnson! Johnson party of four.

(EVERYONE turns at the sound of the HOSTESS.)

JOYCE: *(Relieved, waving to the HOSTESS offstage and grabbing MIRIAM's hand to hide her gesture, all with a nervous laugh.)* Goodness, there's our table.

MIRIAM: Oh, good. You know, I haven't ate since breakfast.

(JOYCE smiles at LEVI and then lovingly escorts MIRIAM past RUTH, who watches them go with a warm smile. Levi passes RUTH as well.)

RUTH: *(Smiling.)* 'Fraid I didn't catch your last name, young man.

(LEVI stops dead in his tracks and inescapably turns to RUTH.)

LEVI: *(Honestly.)* Kohen, ma'am.

(Pause.)

RUTH: Like George M. Cohan?

LEVI: *(Nervously.)* S-s-something like, yes.

RUTH: Good Irish name.

(LEVY takes a deep breath before replying and instead stammers. Lost in her memory, RUTH continues to speak.)

RUTH: *(Smiling.)* You know, back before we sold the farm, my John used to whistle "Yankee Doodle Dandy" when he was out on the tractor.

LEVI: Is – is that so?

(RUTH smiles impassively. LEVI smiles and nods back nervously. Finally, he politely gestures for her to lead, and RUTH exits ahead of him.)

LEVI: Oy!

(LEVI immediately slaps his hand over his mouth, fearing that RUTH heard him, and then races off after the others.)

End of scene. Blackout. "Mamba Italiano" in. The stage is reset.

*RECORDING: Hey, mambo! Mambo Italiano!
Hey, mambo! Mambo Italiano!
Go, go, go, you mixed up Siciliano.*

*All you Calabrese do the mambo like a crazy with-a
Hey mambo, don't wanna tarantella.
Hey mambo, no more the mozzarella
Hey, mambo! Mambo Italiano!*

I-2

As the scene shifts, the title “antipasto” appears over an image of the restaurant’s dining area. The text and music fade as the lights rise. EVERYONE is seated at a table set for five, with one chair conspicuously empty. Salt and pepper shakers, a butter ramekin, and a loaf of brown bread served on a wooden serving board are at the center of the table, while water glasses, dishes, silverware, and cloth napkins in brass napkin rings are set at each place. RUTH and MIRIAM have been served sweet iced tea, and JOYCE and LEVI have been served wine. EVERYONE shares bread and butter as they talk.

MIRIAM: Oh my, but it was a lovely ceremony.

JOYCE: I’m so sorry I missed it. Work at the Whitehead has been exhausting. I’ve just been running from one research project to the next. Oh my gosh, I nearly forgot about my pager.

(JOYCE reaches for her purse, pulls out a pager, and places it on the table.)

MIRIAM: Your – pager?

JOYCE: Yes. Even though I’m here, I’m on call if something goes wrong back at the lab.

RUTH: *(Disapprovingly.)* Does it have to be placed on the table?

JOYCE: *(Nervously trying to smooth things over.)* Don’t worry. It probably won’t even go off.

(RUTH stares at the pager disapprovingly.)

JOYCE: Just forget about it.

(Pause as JOYCE notices RUTH staring.)

JOYCE: *(Changing the subject.)* Well – like I said, I’m so sorry I didn’t make it to Aunt Esther’s funeral, but it just couldn’t be helped –

(JOYCE places her hand atop the pager to get RUTH’S attention.)

JOYCE: Mother.

RUTH: (*Politely dismissive.*) No need. Weren't no trouble, really. No harder than sellin' off the farm. The Lord provided.

JOYCE: (*Hurt.*) Well – thank the Lord for that.

MIRIAM: (*Changing the subject.*) 'Nough about us. So, Levi, tell us 'bout yourself.

RUTH: (*Smiling at JOYCE pointedly.*) Yes, please. Joyce here's been awfully tight-lipped.

MIRIAM: Like she was hidin' you under a bushel.

LEVI: (*Stammering.*) Well, there's not much to tell, really. I'm in finance.

MIRIAM: Oh, you work at a bank?

LEVI: Not exactly. I'm a stock trader.

MIRIAM: An' what's that?

LEVI: Oh, I buy and sell stocks.

(*Pause as RUTH and MIRIAM stare at LEVI.*)

RUTH: (*Encouragingly.*) Go on.

LEVI: Well, uhm, imagine you own a little bakery, and you sell challah –

RUTH: Beg your pardon?

JOYCE: (*Jumping in.*) Levi was saying – if you sell – a helluva lot of muffins.

LEVI: (*Nodding to JOYCE.*) Uhm. Right!

JOYCE: (*Smacking him.*) Watch your language, hon.

LEVI: Oh, right. Sorry, ladies. So, uhm, yeah. Let's say one day your muffins are flying off the shelves, so you increase the price, but the next day, no one'll touch them, so you lower the price. Well, instead of muffins, I buy and sell little pieces of big companies. If I buy low and sell high, I make a profit.

RUTH: Hmm... so, like buyin' a ham before the holidays and sellin' it when the price jumps?

LEVI: Exactly! But with a little more paperwork.