

## Just Desserts for Johnny

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Author Chris Roerden said this about the story: "*Just Desserts for Johnny*" by Edith Maxwell is a model short story, from the perfect opening line to the satisfying, twist end. Love it!

She hadn't planned on killing Johnny Sorbetto that winter. He had promised her so much.

"Baby, everybody's going to buy your book. All my authors make the bestseller list, they get reviews in the *New Yorker*," he'd said in the sexiest Italian accent she'd ever heard. "You won't believe it. They're going to beat down your door."

Publication was all Yvonne had ever wanted. Her stories in the hands of the reading public.

Hard to believe it was only six weeks ago when Johnny had approached her at The Metro, the crotch of his snug-fitting pants right at table level. The bar had seen better days, but the wine was cheap and signed pictures of literary luminaries lined the walls. While Yvonne sat at the chipped wooden table with her laptop, she could pretend she was a struggling author in Paris instead of a radiology tech in Daly City.

Johnny had raised an eyebrow and smiled, flashing a mouthful of white but crooked teeth. "I see we have something in common."

It wasn't their age. He had to be at least ten years younger than Yvonne's forty-five. She waited, trying to keep her eyes on his face. She smoothed her bottle-blond hair, hoping she'd applied makeup that day.

"You write. I publish. How's that for a match made in heaven?" He winked at her. "May I?" He gestured to the other chair.

Yvonne's heart rate sped up. A publisher? Was this the break she'd been waiting for?

"I'm Johnny. Johnny Sorbetto." He extended his hand across the table. "Talk to me about what you write."

Yvonne shook his hand. He held onto hers longer than strictly necessary. The warmth became a bodily buzz aimed in an embarrassing direction.

"I'm Yvonne Maupin." She withdrew her hand.

"You must be related to the other Maupin," Johnny crooned. "And you're clearly French with a lovely name like Yvonne."

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Yvonne smiled. He could think what he liked. As far as she knew, the extent of her relation to Armistead Maupin was that she only dreamed of gaining the same kind of fame from her own writing and that they lived in the same city, sort of.

“I write literary fiction. Stories about troubled souls relating. Set here in San Francisco.”

“The City by the Bay.” Johnny slid a business card across the table. “Email me your stuff. In the meantime, can I buy you a drink?”

When she agreed, Johnny caught the bartender’s attention and nodded. A moment later, two flutes and a just-opened bottle of Moët sat on the table between them.

“Champagne?”

Johnny poured two glasses. Handing one to her, he said, “To congratulate you.”

Yvonne frowned. “For what?”

“I’m sure your work is as beautiful as you are. We’ll have it out in digital formats in a couple of weeks, and in print two weeks later. Here’s to your career.” He lifted his glass.

Yvonne was speechless. She never turned down a free drink, though, and clinked her glass with his.

After the bubbly went down, she found her voice. “Surely your editorial staff will want to read my manuscript before you accept it, though.”

He waved a hand. “Oh, of course. But we’ll talk about that later. Now, tell me about yourself.” He leaned in and locked his deep brown eyes on hers.

Yvonne wasn’t sure she’d ever seen such long curly lashes on a man or such nicely shaped shoulders under an Italian-cut shirt. What did she have to lose? She was single, unpublished, unhappy, and somewhat underfunded. A gorgeous man was buying her drinks and wanted her to talk about herself. Nothing wrong with that picture.

They finished off the bottle and adjourned to the bistro next door for dinner, the bistro she’d never been able to afford. Johnny treated her to the meal, the best steak and frites she’d ever had, along with a bottle of real French red wine, and flan with cognac to finish. By the time he suggested taking her home through the snow, the world looked so soft and rosy she’d have agreed to anything.

“Oh, Johnny,” she giggled after his French kiss and full-body embrace convinced her to invite him to stay the night.

The next morning he was already gone when she awoke with fuzzy mouth and pounding head. She lay in bed and smiled, though, then threw on a robe and moved straight to her laptop.

She gave her manuscript one final spell check then started an email message. In the subject line she typed, “Querying *Souls by the Bay*.” She sat back to scrutinize the screen. She knew about querying, and, despite Johnny’s assurances that the editors would love her book, Yvonne wanted to do everything right. This was a professional relationship she was entering into, after all. Even though she’d forgotten to ask the name of the press.

Yvonne dug Johnny’s card out of her bag. His email name was Gianni. Wasn’t that clever? Johnny in Italian. Odd that the rest of the address was one of the free email providers and not the press name. Oh, well. She attached her file. She copied in the query-letter text she’d polished and honed and sent out to so many agents and presses over the last two years she’d lost count.

She pressed Send. The edgy feeling in her gut must have been excitement. She suddenly realized it was the aftermath of last night’s drinking, instead. Yvonne barely made it to the bathroom.

She managed to get through the rest of the morning. It was her day off and she didn't have much to do beyond checking her email every five minutes to see if Johnny had responded. She washed the sheets, read the newspaper, and perused her few Facebook friends.

Finally the little new-email ding sounded. Yvonne opened Johnny's reply to her query. She read it, then leapt up and whooped. He confirmed that he wanted to publish *Souls by the Bay!*

Yvonne sat again. She reread the message. He said editorial would be done with their part in ten days. He included a simple contract. The financials were great – thirty-five percent to Golden Gate Press and sixty-five percent to the author, after costs. No advance against royalties, but Johnny assured her the quarterly checks would be sizable. He said he would design the cover himself.

Yvonne wrote back, asking the names of the rest of the staff. She wanted to read up on their other publications.

Johnny replied almost immediately. "They are busy people and don't want to be bothered with correspondence. I agreed to be the face of Golden Gate. Are you good with the contract?"

This was a little terse. He was her new lover, after all. But she replied that she accepted the contract and asked for a mailing address where she could send her signed copy.

"Not necessary. Email correspondence will suffice."

That must be how the modern publishing world worked, Yvonne thought. She felt dizzy with pride and elation.

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But now? Now her dream was shredded like a bag of pizza cheese. Johnny kept assuring her the edits were nearly finished. When she asked him when they could go out for a drink, he said he was too busy.

"You want that book to come out, don't you, Yvie? We're working 24/7 around here. And you're not the only author we have."

Yvonne said she understood. She sent out messages hyping the release date on Twitter and Facebook. She set up a book launch party at an independent bookstore and asked her library to purchase the ebook. She even mentioned it during the Announcements period at the Unity Church she occasionally attended, although one of the regulars scolded her afterward for bringing the secular into the sacred space.

When the ten days were done, Johnny hadn't sent her proofs. She dialed his number.

"I thought the book was supposed to be out on Kindle and Nook this Friday."

"Yvette..."

"It's Yvonne." Despite getting her name wrong – how could he? – hearing Johnny's resonant voice stirred her in the groin area.

"Yvonne, just relax. Patience is a virtue."

Telling Yvonne to relax was counterproductive. "When can I expect to see the formatted versions?"

He promised her it would be the following week.

Yvonne searched the Internet. Golden Gate wasn't mentioned on the sites where writers posted warnings about presses. In fact, she couldn't find the press anywhere. She searched for Johnny's name. He barely had an Internet presence, either, odd for the public face of a reputable small press.

Next week came and went. No edits, no formatted versions, nothing from Johnny. Her emails went unanswered. She realized she had instigated almost all their email interaction. How

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could she have been so naïve? So desperate to get her book published? She had to face it. He was a liar.

Yvonne resolved to move forward. She worked on her next book. When the nurse explained her itching was from an STD, Yvonne figured she deserved it, and that she was lucky she hadn't gotten a worse disease from her night with Mr. Sorbetto. She started writing at the Daily Grounds instead of at The Metro.

Two weeks later she ordered a romance novel online. The site popped up with the Customers-Who-Bought-This-Item-Also-Bought message. Yvonne stared. The title of the first selection was *Souls in the Windy City*, by Yvette Sorbetto. It had a dozen stellar reviews. She read the first paragraph aloud. It was her book. Word for word, except he'd changed San Francisco into Chicago. *What the hell?*

Yvonne pushed back her chair. She wanted to throw something, call the police, scream. Most of all she wanted to throttle, castrate, and then murder Johnny Sorbetto.

She paced. If she called him, he wouldn't meet with her. She'd never gotten that mailing address and didn't know where to find him. She could start frequenting The Metro again, but wasn't sure she could control herself in public if he showed up. She could try to hire a lawyer and sue. But she couldn't afford one. Knowing Johnny, he'd find some way to slither out of taking the blame.

Yvonne sat with the problem for a few days. She let the initial fire of her emotions settle into a simmering stew of passion-driven logic. Driving home from work on the third day, Yvonne snapped her fingers. She nodded, smiling. Only one thing remained – how to keep him from coming after her in return. Oh, right. The oldest trick in the memoirist's bag.

Yvonne fired up the laptop when she got home. She wrote. She edited and revised some more. She stayed up all night, figuring out exactly the right wording, creating turns of phrase that were lyrical and concise at the same time. She called in sick the next day. Final word count? 2400. Perfect.

She looked up the contact information, created a query letter, sent it off. Now to wait. Yvonne was patient, in fact, when she wanted to be. She had a really good feeling about this, even though it was a long shot.

Three months passed. She went to her job. At home she finished the work in progress and plotted out a new novel. She subscribed to the *New Yorker*. She adopted a playful black rescue kitten.

When the acceptance email arrived, Yvonne quietly printed it out and picked up a frame for it the next day.

They sent her the issue before it appeared on the newsstand. She flipped to the Fiction section of the *New Yorker* with shaking hands. There it was. "Just Desserts for Gianni" by Yvonne Maupin, which detailed the unfortunate murder of a literary thief with a very small penis.

Sweet. Publication and revenge, too. Murder could be so satisfying when you were safe from prosecution. And she was pretty damn sure Johnny Sorbetto wouldn't come after her.