

Death by Potato Salad
a Mira James Comic Caper Mysteries Short Story
by Jess Lourey

Mrs. Berns' form-fitting, black t-shirt read "80 is the new 30." She wore elastic-waisted pants, not because she was large but because at her age, every second counted. She was, in fact, a trim woman whose hair was currently the color of an overripe apricot, who couldn't see past her nose without her thick-rimmed cat eye glasses, and who didn't stay in the lines when she colored and so certainly wasn't going to bother when she applied lipstick.

She'd also lived long enough to recognize that life was always good, even when it was bad. That's why she had a slight twinkle in her eye as she kneeled next to the corpse in the bright light of the kitchen and uttered three grim words:

"Clearly, it's murder."

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May in Battle Lake, Minnesota, is beautiful. The new green of the leaves convinces people that maybe winter wasn't really that bad, and the lilac blossoms perfume the air with a sweet purple honey. Why Mrs. Berns had allowed Pastor Winter to talk her into leaving all that beauty to head north to godforsaken Bemidji for the All Church weekend retreat was anyone's guess. Well, really, it was her guess: she wanted a little action, and she'd already run through all the decent prospects in Battle Lake. With the motto, "You're never too late for a coed slumber party" in the forefront of her mind, she'd boarded the orange school bus and headed upstate toward the land of Paul Bunyan.

The All Church retreat had begun ten years ago, the idea being to bring together church-going Minnesotans of all denominations to celebrate faith and forge common ground. It being Minnesota, the retreat drew Presbyterians, Catholics, and Lutherans. Mrs. Berns could pick out a Presbyterian at 100 feet by the way the ladies clutched their purses. The Catholics were harder to identify as they went to great lengths, she thought, to blend in, but more often than not, they couldn't leave the house without a cross around their neck and an apology on their lips, so they were easy to spot if you got close enough.

The Lutherans, well, they were her people.

The retreat had been held at the Morningwood Lodge since its inception, based on the theory that Bemidji is equally far away from everyone. The Lodge was actually three sprawling buildings, each named for a northern Minnesota animal, spread over 30 acres of lakeside property. Because over 120 people had registered for the retreat this year, it was held in the Moose building, the largest. Upon entering the Moose, all participants were assigned rooms and asked to return to the main hall as soon as they'd unpacked.

The first thing Mrs. Berns had noticed after dropping off her bags and upon entering the main hall was that the gender ratio was 70/30 women to men, an imbalance she'd grown accustomed to in the last decade or so. It turns out that life is a long race won by women, a fact that gave her the giggles every time she thought about it. The second thing she observed was a very tall gentleman clad in pleated khakis and a white polo shirt that accented his beautifully wrinkled, tan skin. He must have recently returned from the south,

another point in his favor. What really hooked her, though, was the thick white mustache that hung on each side of his mouth like a welcome mat. She was a sucker for facial hair. His name tag read "Joe," and he was standing on the edge of the crowd rather than taking a seat. Mrs. Berns didn't usually date in her age group, but when in Rome.

She threaded her way through the throng and nudged him in the side. "Come here often?"

He turned to her, startled. "No. This is my second time."

Mrs. Berns pursed her lips and tried again. "With a great mustache comes great responsibility."

She winked so he couldn't possibly miss the innuendo this time, but rather than smile back, he blushed and glanced around the packed main hall with immense interest, as if the hundred-odd geriatrics milling about had suddenly begun twerking. Had Mrs. Berns pegged him wrong? Was he really an old man, rather than a good time with wrinkles? Before she could shoot her last rocket and ask him what a girl did around here for fun, the crowd began to move with intention.

"What's happening?" she asked.

He pointed at the white screen at the head of the main hall. It read, "Day One Icebreaker Classes" in a holy font. Underneath appeared five selections:

- Advanced Hotdish
- Miracles with Mayonnaise
- How to See God in the Face of Your Enemies (Church Committee Mediation Techniques)
- Christian Crafts
- The Art of Funeral Small Talk

The All Church director, a man named William with a ready smile and a silver mane of hair, was grouping attendees according to where they wanted to spend the afternoon. Not yet ready to give up on the whiff of excitement she'd felt when she'd first set eyes on Joe, Mrs. Berns tailed him to a group, and then followed that group into a classroom. It wasn't until she was inside that she realized she'd chosen "Miracles of Mayonnaise."

In the front of the kitchen classroom, a white-haired woman grinned widely at them. She had a whiteboard behind her and eggs, lemon, vinegar, mustard, salt, and canola oil sitting on the table in front of her. The room housed eight other stations, each of them consisting of a table holding up the same ingredients.

"Welcome," the teacher said, clasping her hands together. "You have now entered the wonderful world of mayonnaise. My name is Mrs. Zindahl, and I'll be guiding you on your journey today. Before we begin, however, I must issue a warning. Homemade mayonnaise is the pufferfish of the church kitchen, deadly if not prepared properly. But *mmm* is it delicious when you do it right!"

Mrs. Berns grimaced and studied her competition. Joe stood across the room with two other men, one who resembled a dumpling and the other a green bean that'd been in the microwave too long. Two single women besides her and the teacher had also taken the class. One of those women was making googly eyes at Joe. The room also held three married couples, two of them standing near Mrs. Berns and the other leaning against the

industrial refrigerator in the back of the room. The refrigerator couple appeared very much in love, probably a second marriage. The husband must be in his 80s, but the wife was young, no more than 70. Of the two couples standing next to her, one was unremarkable, and the other gave her the willies. The husband had been making fun of his wife since they'd walked in. She'd kept trying to laugh off what he said, but her eyes seemed both tired and sad.

"I don't even know why we walked into this class," he was saying, his voice low enough not to interrupt the teacher but loud enough that everyone within five feet could hear him, "when you're already a g-d scientist in the kitchen. We should have gone to funeral small talk so you could learn something about making conversation."

It was his fourth put-down in as many minutes. The wife shrunk into herself. The other couple inched away imperceptibly. Mrs. Berns tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me."

The husband turned, an expectant smile on his face. "Yah?"

"Did you just say 'g-d' instead of 'goddamn?'"

He winked at her. "It is a church retreat."

"You're an asshole." Mrs. Berns strolled to the back of the room and ending up standing near the second-marriage couple, whom, she noticed, were taking great pains to avoid looking at the obnoxious husband whose side she had just left. That's when William, the retreat's director, entered, a brilliant smile on his face. He swept the room with it, but the grin faltered when he laid eyes on the rude man. Mrs. Berns guessed it wasn't the awful husband's first time at the retreat.

"Am I too late to join the fun?" William asked, pinning his smile back on.

"You're perfectly on time," Mrs. Zindahl said. "I was just about to break everyone into pairs. Please all, locate a partner and then choose a cooking station."

Mrs. Berns made a beeline toward Joe, but the other woman who'd been moon-eying him was quicker. Mrs. Berns had let the woman's walker fool her. She wouldn't make that mistake twice.

"Do you have a partner?"

Mrs. Berns turned to the doughy woman who'd appeared at her side. The woman's hair was shockingly brown against her wrinkled features. Mrs. Berns didn't trust the lady, both because as a whitehair she could dye her do any color she chose and had gone with boring brown, and because the woman hadn't once glanced at Joe. But what choice did Mrs. Berns have? She shrugged. "No, but you better not slow me down."

As they made their way to a station, the woman introduced herself by tapping on her name tag. "I'm Tabitha. My friends call me Bitha."

Mrs. Berns held out her hand. "Mrs. Berns."

Bitha nodded across the room at the obnoxious husband and his meek wife. "That's Hiram and Lucille. They come every year."

"Is he always so rude?"

Bitha's eyes widened, and then she dropped them, a blush creeping up her cheeks. Like a good Minnesotan, she changed the subject rather than answer. "This is the perfect class for me. I just started the Norwegian diet last week. I can only eat white food. I haven't lost any weight yet, but it's early."

Mrs. Berns made a point of not talking as they mixed the ingredients, which was no problem as Bitha chattered enough for the both of them. First, Mrs. Berns separated an egg

and stirred together the yolk, lemon juice, vinegar, mustard, and 1/2 teaspoon salt until it turned bright yellow. Like most women of her generation, she'd been cooking since the time she could walk. Although she had her favorites, she didn't mind learning a new recipe now and again.

The main ingredients blended, Mrs. Berns whisked while Bitha drizzled $\frac{3}{4}$ of a cup of canola oil into the main mixture, one drop at a time, until they had a thick, fluffy bowl of mayonnaise. Mrs. Berns was sweating but proud of the final product. The only factor taking the edge off her joy was Hiram's continual criticism of Lucille two stations over. Mrs. Berns wanted to bop him on the head and vowed to do just that next time he came close.

Once everyone's mayonnaise was complete, Mrs. Zindahl gave each station the opportunity to select one dish from the All Church cookbook to create with their fresh mayonnaise. Mrs. Berns selected tuna salad without consulting Bitha, who, to be fair, had done little so far. They were directed to retrieve the necessary ingredients from the refrigerator and the pantry in the back of the room. Mrs. Berns tried to catch Joe's eye when she grabbed for the onions and he for the garlic, but he seemed to be avoiding her glance.

She shrugged. His loss.

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Zindahl declared it time to pass the dishes around for a mayo-bliss taste test. Everyone was given a set of tasting spoons, and the big glass bowls traveled from station to station. Mrs. Berns decided to use the same spoon each time, figuring it'd save on dishes later.

The concoctions ranged from disgusting—the mayonnaise snickers marshmallow delight—to heavenly—Lucille's potato salad. The salad was creamy, not too heavy on the dressing, with the perfect amount of celery crunch and tangy salt. Hiram had been right about his wife. She really was a genius in the kitchen. A person wouldn't know it by him, though. Because his wife had passed their dish to her left at Mrs. Zindahl's request, Hiram was the last one to get a taste of their salad. Mrs. Berns looked up just as he brought a spoonful to his mouth.

"Lucille, I believe you've created s-h on a shingle," he said, loud enough to draw the attention of everyone in the room.

Lucille, clearly agitated, tried to smile up at the small gathering while she took the bowl from her husband. Her hands were shaking so badly, though, that she dropped it. It shattered on the floor.

"I'm so sorry," she said quietly, her chin quivering.

Hiram glared at her, his eyebrows crossed in annoyance. "Yes you are, Lucille. You're a sorry woman all around."

Mrs. Berns made her way over to help, shooting eye knives at Hiram as she passed. He made a deliberate show of ignoring the glare.

Mrs. Zindahl clucked and clapped her hands, breaking the uncomfortable mood. "We've finished early, so we've just enough time for a sneak peek at my 'Creative Cool Whip' seminar."

Hiram made a noise like a bull. Mrs. Berns glanced up from her position on the floor, where she was kneeling next to Lucille, both of them delicately tossing the glass shards into a nearby garbage. Mrs. Berns assumed Hiram was making a commentary about the Cool Whip class, something she regrettably had to agree with. Then she saw his face. It was purpling, his eyes bulging. He made the bull grunt-snuffle again, only it wasn't as loud as

the first time. His hands clutched his stomach, he doubled over, vomited powerfully, and dropped dead to the floor.

Mrs. Berns had a slight twinkle in her eye as she kneeled next to the corpse in the bright light of the kitchen, carefully avoiding his barf.

"Clearly, it's murder," she said.

"What?" Bitha had run over and was staring into Hiram's dead, open eyes. Her voice was shrill. "Murder?"

Mrs. Berns stood, grabbed a tablecloth from a stack near the door, and covered Hiram and his upchuck. "Yup," she said knowingly, pleased beyond words that this retreat had finally gotten interesting. "I was there for The Great Otter Tail County Salmonella Outbreak of 1997."

A hush passed through the room. A bad batch of hot dogs had made their way through a certain nursing home system some years before. It was the stuff of legend, and people bragged about surviving it much as they did a tornado or a hurricane.

"I was a volunteer nursing assistant at the time. I was on the front lines. I know food poisoning. Since only one of us got it but all of us ate the same food, this is clearly foul play."

William, the director, opened his mouth and then closed it, his brilliant smile dimmed. Mrs. Berns read that as permission to take charge. "Given the weapon, we know one of you in this room is responsible, and I have some ideas who. I suggest we finger the culprit before the police arrive and mess everything up. First things first." She placed her hands on her hips. "I want all the Catholics and Presbyterians out of this room. It takes a full-blood Lutheran to turn mayonnaise into a precision killing tool."

The people in the kitchen classroom glanced uncertainly from one to the other, and then began streaming out, careful to avoid the perimeter of the corpse. Finally, only William, Bitha, Lucille, and the couple who had been standing near the industrial refrigerator remained.

"So," Mrs. Berns said, addressing William. "Wanna tell me what that look you gave Hiram when you first walked in here was all about?"

William couldn't rip his eyes away from the man-shaped tablecloth on the floor. "It's no secret. Hiram and his wife attended last year's retreat. I walked in on him stealing money from the orphan fund jar. I told him to leave the retreat, but instead, he told everyone he'd caught *me* stealing the money. In the end, it was my word against his, and we had to let the matter drop."

Mrs. Berns nodded. "Revenge. It's a good motive. Do you want to hear an even better one?" She pointed a finger at Bitha, enjoying every minute of this. "Love."

"Me? I didn't love him." Bitha's face was the picture of shock, but when Mrs. Berns wouldn't drop her gaze, the woman folded into a puddle of tears. "At least...I didn't want to."

"For shame, woman," Mrs. Berns said, recalling the simpering way Bitha had avoided agreeing with Mrs. Berns when she'd called out Hiram's awful behavior. The only explanation that made sense was that Bitha was riding his bologna pony. "You don't sleep with another woman's husband, especially when he's such a turd. The affair happened last year?"

Bitha nodded, a fat tear rolling down her cheek.

Mrs. Berns turned her attention to the couple by the fridge. "The two of you didn't glance at Hiram even once during this whole class, even though he's been an obnoxious donkey since we started. What's your story?"

The husband ran his hands through his thick silver hair and clenched his fists. "I caught him harassing my wife right before this class. She was leaving the bathroom, and he was trying to push her back in. He said it was a misunderstanding. I said I'd kill him if he touched her again."

His wife curled her arm through his and smiled up at him. "He didn't mean it of course. He wouldn't hurt a spider."

That left only Lucille, who'd kept her eyes pinned to the ground since her husband had dropped.

"Lucille?" Mrs. Berns said.

Lucille's eyes flashed up, and Mrs. Berns recognized immediately why the woman had been avoiding contact. Her eyes were wild, though the fierce emotion drained away as soon as she met Mrs. Berns' gaze. Without the momentary fire, Lucille appeared small and gray, a soul-tired woman in her late 70s wearing second-hand clothes and sporting an out-of-date haircut, standing next to the warm corpse of her abusive husband.

"I'm so sorry for the mess," Lucille said, beginning to cry. She reached into the cuff of her sleeve and pulled out a Kleenex. A small glass vial immediately dropped out and fell to the linoleum. Amazingly, it didn't break, rather hitting the ground with a soft "tink" and then rolling to the edge of the tablecloth near Mrs. Berns' feet. The insides of the glass vial were smeared with a white cream: the poisoned mayonnaise.

The room gasped. Lucille shrugged, resigned. "He kicked the cat," she said, by way of explanation. "She was the only thing he'd ever treated well, and then last week, he kicked her."

Mrs. Berns studied the five living people in the bright kitchen. Bitha, who'd apparently had her heart broken by Hiram. The married couple, deeply in love and whose sense of security had been pierced by Hiram's assault. The director, who'd had his reputation sullied by the man under the tablecloth. Finally, Lucille, who herself looked like a dog that had been kicked so many times, she'd almost forgotten how to get up.

Almost.

Outside, the wail of a siren pierced the cool spring air.

"As I was saying earlier, it's clearly murder..." Mrs. Berns cleared her throat. "...for an old lady to lose her husband so late in life, and to something as random as food poisoning." She forced eye contact with each person the room. Every one of them met her stare with a nod, a tiny smile on more than one face. Lucille's expression was one of grateful shock. The corpse lay on the floor between her and Mrs. Berns.

"Let's leave the trash here," Mrs. Berns said, "and go into the non-denominational chapel so that we can all better comfort the new widow."

Mrs. Berns reached down to grab the glass vial. She handed it to Lucille. Then, all five of them stepped around the body and left the Miracles with Mayonnaise classroom, never once looking back.

THE END

Mrs. Berns is a recurring character in the 12-part comic caper Mira James Mysteries. To spend more time with her, check out the full series, published in this order:

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