

THE GREAT MINNESOTA HOT DISH

A comedy in one act
by
Bradley Hayward

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SYNOPSIS

Three generations of headstrong women battle for culinary glory in a kitschy Minnesota kitchen. As high end ingredients clash with budget tater tots, long held secrets bubble to the surface alongside the cream of mushroom soup. It is a high sodium comedy that proves when it comes to family, the only thing thicker than the gravy is the drama.

CHARACTERS

(3f)

BONNIE: (60, f) An ample and outgoing woman. Her bottle blonde hair is teased into a large round pouf that resembles cotton candy. She wears a bedazzled sweater with skin tight leopard print leggings. All of this is accessorized with dangle earrings, multiple bracelets, and rings on every finger.

LINDA: (40, f) Bonnie's extremely uptight daughter. She wears a conservative pant suit and tremendously high heels that allow her to tower over everyone else. Her hair is neatly slicked back into a tight bun.

SHANNON: (20, f) Linda's scattered daughter. Her frizzy hair is loosely pulled back into a pony tail. She wears an over sized University of Minnesota sweat shirt and baggy pajama pants.

SETTING

BONNIE'S kitchen. It's a terrifying explosion of kitsch. There are ceramic roosters on every surface, a Live Laugh Love sign written in glitter, and enough copper molds to outfit a small army. Facing front is an extended counter top, equipped with a sink, stove, and plenty of cookware.

RUNNING TIME

10 minutes.

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(The lights rise.)

(BONNIE is alone. She's hunched over a massive Pyrex dish like a mad scientist. She holds a can of Cream of Mushroom soup in one hand and a bag of Extreme Cheddar tater tots in the other. She looks at the ceiling.)

BONNIE: Lord, I know pride is a sin, but if you let me beat Barb Swenson this year, I promise to stop stealing Splenda packets from Perkins.

(She plops the soup in the Pyrex. She begins meticulously lining up tater tots in perfect, military grade rows.)

Shoulder to shoulder, boys. We're going to St. Paul.

(LINDA enters, looking like she just stepped out of a corporate photo shoot. She carries a briefcase and a bag of high end groceries. She stops, taking in the scene with a look of profound physical pain.)

LINDA: Mother. You look like a Cheetah Girl joined a cult.

BONNIE: And hello to you too, Linda. You're late. The oven's already preheated to three fifty, and I've secured the Crispy Crowns.

LINDA: (Sets her bag down) I'm not late. I optimized my arrival. And I'm not using crowns this year. I'm doing a deconstructed wild rice bake with a Gruyere reduction and toasted sliced almonds.

BONNIE: (Clutches her fake pearls) Gruyere? In a hot dish? This is the State Fair, Linda, not a fundraiser for the opera. You use Monterey Jack or you use nothing at all. People want comfort, not a French lesson. And almonds? You want to send the judges into anaphylactic shock?

LINDA: It's called texture, Mother. Something your dish lacks. Yours always has the consistency of a damp sponge.

BONNIE: Once upon a time, that sponge won me a Red Ribbon! And for your information, the secret to a good bind is not over stirring. You treat the Cream of Mushroom like a nervous horse. Don't spook it!

LINDA: (Unpacks a bottle of expensive white wine) I'm using a reduction of Sauvignon Blanc. No cans. No condensed anything. I'm moving the family brand into the twenty first century.

BONNIE: The twenty first century is hungry, Linda. That's why you're divorced and eating seaweed. People at the fair want something that reminds them of their childhood, before they

had mortgages and irritable bowel syndrome. They want sodium!

LINDA: They want sophistication. That's why I sell real estate in the Twin Cities and you're selling knitted toilet paper covers on Etsy.

BONNIE: Those covers provide dignity to a bathroom! Last week I sold one to a woman in Crookston who said it was the only thing keeping her marriage together. It creates an atmosphere!

LINDA: It creates a fire hazard. Now, move your bedazzled elbows. I need the marble slab for my shallots.

(SHANNON wanders in. She looks like she hasn't seen sunlight or a hairbrush in weeks. She carries a crumpled paper bag and a single bruised onion.)

SHANNON: Is there caffeine? Or, like, a heavy sedative? I'll take either.

LINDA: Shannon! Look at you. You look like a squatter. Why aren't you in Intro to Economics?

SHANNON: (Drops the bag on the counter) Changed my major again, Mom. I'm into Applied Silence now. Also, I'm flunking it because I talked once.

BONNIE: Oh, honey, don't worry. You're just a late bloomer. Like a Christmas cactus. Now, get your apron on. We're competing!

SHANNON: I think I'm just gonna make "Sadness: A Casserole." It's mostly Funyuns.

LINDA: (Sighs heavily) We're a line of champions, Shannon. My grandmother won the Blue Ribbon with her "Saucy Sausage Surprise." My mother won with –

BONNIE: "The Lutheran's Lust." It had a secret ingredient.

LINDA: (Rolls her eyes) It was MSG, Mother. We all knew.

BONNIE: It was love, Linda. And a little bit of Accent seasoning.

(BONNIE turns back to her dish, her expression suddenly shifting from bubbly to uncharacteristically sharp.)

Speaking of surprises. I saw your ex-husband at the Pamida yesterday.

LINDA: The Pamida? They closed all the Pamidas years ago, Mother.

BONNIE: Well, this one was in a town so small the news hasn't reached them yet. They still had a bin of five dollar DVDs and a shelf of Banana Wackies. And there he was, standing by the seasonal decor.

LINDA: (Tries to sound indifferent) I don't care if he was time travelling through a department store. Brian is dead to me. He chose a life of finding himself, which apparently involves a studio apartment in St. Cloud and a girlfriend who doesn't believe in bras.

BONNIE: He wasn't finding himself, Linda. He was finding ingredients. He had a casserole carrier in his cart. And he was with...her.

SHANNON: (Perks up) The yoga instructor? The one who calls her toes little light beams?

BONNIE: The very one. And, Linda, she was holding a family recipe card. A yellowed one. With your Great Aunt Melodie's looping cursive and a very distinct gravy stain in the corner.

LINDA: (Her voice goes up an octave) The “Hot Dish of the Covenant”? That’s impossible. That recipe is under lock and key in the safe deposit box at First National. It’s the only reason we’re still invited to the mayor’s Christmas brunch.

BONNIE: (Lowers her voice) I went to the bank on Tuesday to check the inventory. The box was empty, Linda. Just a lone bay leaf and a sense of betrayal.

SHANNON: Is this the part where we find out Dad didn't just leave for the yoga? He left for the culinary intellectual property?

LINDA: If that man enters Aunt Melodie's “Hot Dish of the Covenant” into the State Fair under that girl's name, I will burn the grandstand to the ground.

BONNIE: (Nods) I’ve already got the lighter fluid in the Buick. But first, we have to find out how he got the key.

(BONNIE looks slowly from LINDA to SHANNON. SHANNON suddenly becomes very interested in peeling her bruised onion.)

SHANNON: So, does anyone have a Band Aid? I think I just cut myself on a memory.

LINDA: (Narrows her eyes at SHANNON) Shannon. Why are you suddenly bleeding memories? What did you do?

SHANNON: (Mumbles) I might have, um, borrowed the key? I thought the box had Grandma’s old savings bonds. I needed to pay off the lab fees for my Interpretive Camping course.

BONNIE: You took the key to the covenant to pay for a tent?

SHANNON: It’s not a tent, Grandma! It’s a spiritual dwelling! Anyway, the box didn't have any bonds. It just had that greasy recipe card and a box of Jell-O 1-2-3.

LINDA: (Voice trembles) Jell-O 1-2-3? That was discontinued in the nineties! That was a vintage three layered miracle of food science!

SHANNON: Well, it’s one layer now. I ate it. It tasted like chalk. But Dad saw the recipe on my coffee table when he came over to borrow my jumper cables. He said it looked historically significant.

LINDA: Historically significant? It’s a weapon of mass destruction! If that recipe falls into the hands of someone in Grand Forks, and I mean the North Dakota side –

(BONNIE gasps.)

Our family name is mud. We’d be the laughing stock of the entire Red River Valley! They don't even use real butter over there. They use spread!

BONNIE: (Slaps the counter) Enough! We can't worry about the Dakotas now. We have work

to do. Shannon, start chopping that onion. Linda, get your, whatever reduction is, off my stove.

(They begin a frantic dance around the kitchen, preparing their dishes. The tension is thick, but for a moment they work in rhythmic unison. The clinking of BONNIE's spoon, the rhythmic chop of SHANNON's knife, and the click clack of LINDA's high heels. SHANNON finally breaks the silence.)

SHANNON: You know, in Applied Silence, we learn that the ego is like gravy. It smothers the soul until you can't breathe.

LINDA: Shannon, if you say soul one more time, I'm going to use your ponytail to deglaze this pan. Focus. If your father is actually entering Aunt Melodie's recipe, he's going to use the pseudonym he used the last time he entered.

BONNIE: (Stops mid-stir, horrified) The "Casserole King"? That man couldn't boil water without an instruction manual and a safety helmet. If he has that card, he has the ratio for the Cream of Celery-to-beef foundation.

LINDA: Mother, look at us. We're fractured. We're making three separate dishes. We're splitting the family vote. That's how the North Dakotans win!

SHANNON: (Holds up a mangled piece of onion) Is it too late to tell you that Dad's new girlfriend is originally from West Fargo?

(BONNIE and LINDA both freeze.)

BONNIE: (In a low, terrifying whisper) West Fargo?

LINDA: (Narrows her eyes, gravely) The spread people.

BONNIE: (Slams her spoon down) Change of plans. Linda, put the Gruyere back in the fancy bag. Shannon, throw that onion in the trash, it's suffered enough. We aren't making three dishes.

LINDA: Mother, what are you saying?

BONNIE: (Rolls up her bedazzled sleeves) We're going to perform a culinary exorcism. We're going to combine our forces and create something so high sodium and so sophisticated that the judges will have no choice but to crown us queens of the Midwest.

LINDA: (Hesitant) You want to blend the Gruyere with the Extreme Cheddar? Mother, that's like putting a top hat on a cow.

BONNIE: Then we'll have the fanciest cow in St. Paul! Linda, give me that wine reduction. Shannon, start crushing those Funyuns. We're using them as a structural base.

SHANNON: (A spark of life in her eyes) Like a sub floor for the soul! I can do that.

(LINDA looks at her high end ingredients, then at the tater tots.)

LINDA: If we're doing this, we're doing it with precision. I'll handle the aromatic layering. But Mother, if I see one marshmallow near this Pyrex, the alliance is over.

BONNIE: Deal. Now, Linda. Tell me, when you were still married to that traitor, did he ever

mention the “West Fargo Whisper”?

LINDA: (Gasps) The secret technique of adding crushed saltines to prevent soggy bottom syndrome? He wouldn't dare.

SHANNON: (Crushing Funyuns with a heavy rolling pin) He mentioned it once. He said it was innovative.

BONNIE: Innovative? It's a shortcut for people who don't respect the potato!

(They begin to move in a frantic, coordinated blur. BONNIE whisks with professional intensity while SHANNON organizes the counter. LINDA has an epiphany and slams a spatula on the counter.)

LINDA: Wait! If he has the recipe card, he has the “Midnight Meatloaf” seasoning blend. We need a counter flavour. Something they'd never expect in West Fargo.

BONNIE: (Eyes widen) The Jell-O 1-2-3 trick!

LINDA: Mother, no. We're not putting gelatin in a meat based casserole. We're trying to win, not summon Jesse Ventura.

BONNIE: Not the gelatin, Linda! The technology! We layer it! The wild rice on the bottom, the beef-and-cream-of-everything in the middle, and the Gruyere crusted tots on top. Something with real substance!

SHANNON: It's like a sedimentary rock of dairy. It's beautiful.

LINDA: It's aggressive. It's over the top. It's –

BONNIE: It's Minnesota! Now, hand me those Crispy Crowns. We've got a yoga instructor to humiliate.

(They all reach for the casserole dish, their hands touching. For a brief second, the bickering stops. They look like a team.)

END OF PREVIEW

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