

Pressure To Please

Monalee Saylor sat alone in her kitchen, crinkled lids draped over tired eyes, comfortable in the quietness she had come to know. With only the hum of a Frigidaire in the background, she considered her options, slowly riffling through the Rolodex of recipes she had packed away in her memory.

If this were any other year, she would take her blue-ribbon-worthy Watergate salad to the Methodist Women's Circle brunch next Monday, Labor Day. But this year would be much different. Certain dishes would be conspicuously absent, upsetting the comfortable predictability of the spread.

The upheaval could be traced to a single factor: death. Esther Denny, Fay Fellows, and Alice Thayer had all died in recent months, creating a void not only in the club's coffers, for Fay and Alice were generous patrons, but also in the cold salad selection at the annual brunch.

As much as Monalee missed her friend Esther—their easy companionship and, more salaciously, their scandal-laced conversations—neither she nor anyone else longed for Esther's deviled-egg salad; that was an abomination! On the contrary, everyone fawned over Fay's tangy slaw and Alice's potato salad. Fay's daughter would likely bring the slaw in her mother's stead, so perhaps Monalee would make potato salad. She knew nothing of Alice's coveted recipe, but her own potato salad had a credible pedigree—a favorite among family picnickers and, according to her count, she's gifted the recipe seven times, most recently to the reverend's wife—no trifling compliment, that!

The landline rang, jolting Monalee from her reverie. She picked up the receiver and found Dottie Camp on the line. Not one for drawn-out hellos, Dottie plunged forth. "Monalee, I am trying to nail down dishes for the brunch. With all the..." Dottie hesitated, "...changes in the membership, things are jumbled."

"I was just thinking about the picnic. Given Alice is no longer with us, I'd like to make potato salad. Is that all right?"

"Well," Dottie wheezed, "I suppose. I had you down for Watergate salad, but if you'd like to try potato salad...." Monalee could hear Dottie draw air into her lungs, as a cow might before she lows. Was that exasperation? Uncertainty? "Nothing's easier than Watergate, though. Are you sure?"

The jibe, ever so subtle, stung Monalee. "Of course, Dottie, I'll make the potato salad." Succinct farewells followed, and Monalee placed the receiver in its cradle, sneering faintly. She reached for the half-gallon jug of Heaven Hill vodka, contemplating Dottie's inclination to critique her at every turn.

On Sunday, the day before the brunch, Ennis Morrow dropped off a half bushel of Yukon Gold potatoes he harvested from the acre plot that supplied vegetables to the entire Morrow clan and half of the Flint family. Ennis's wife, Adelaide, was born a Flint, but that family never had much luck growing root vegetables.

"These are about as uniform as I could get, Mrs. Saylor. No oversized potatoes and no nubbins either," Ennis said to Monalee as they both stared into the basket at their feet.

"When they're all the same size, it makes getting into the rhythm of peeling and dicing easier," she explained. "Muscle memory, I guess."

"What are your plans for them?" Ennis asked.

"Potato salad for the Methodist Women's Circle brunch tomorrow. Adelaide signed up to bring fruit salad—the one with the pudding mix—and your mother is baking cookies, the ones with creamed coconut" Monalee answered, a flash of query in her eyes.

"Ah, yeah," Ennis said, his face brightening, "now I know why you wanted Yukon Golds and not russets; they hold up better in the salad." He pulled a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket and said, "And now this shopping list from Adelaide makes much more sense." They shared a laugh, and the man bid farewell to Monalee.

Holding open the screen door with her backside, Monalee bent over and picked up the bushel basket by the wire handles and placed it by the kitchen sink. Her eyes moved to the countertop, inventorying the other ingredients she had collected for the potato salad—mustard, Miracle Whip, dill pickles, celery seed, and the produce: celery, onion, radishes. Eggs were in the refrigerator, ready to be boiled. She rescanned the countertop, sure she was missing something. She closed her eyes, allowing the recipe to materialize in her mind's eye.

Vinegar!

Monalee made her way to the corner cabinet, opened it, and coaxed the lazy Susan into action. She spied store-bought vegetables and fruits. "Really," she whispered, "does anyone need this much fruit cocktail?" She checked the expiration date on a canister of oatmeal. She spun the shelves again, this time noting a half-full bottle of Heaven Hill. Vodka, yes; vinegar, no.

Monalee grabbed her car keys and purse, but then stopped a moment to survey herself in a full-length mirror. She smoothed the blouse over her lumpy midsection and raked a knob-knuckled hand through her gray-streaked bob. Gray, not silver, she thought. With a frown, she set out for the grocery.

As she pulled into the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly, Monalee cringed perceptibly when she spied the bubblegum-pink Cadillac, as this could only mean one thing: Charlotte Foxwell was holding court in the grocery—meticulously coiffed, spectacularly attired, and trendily manicured, no doubt. Esther Denny had a phrase for Charlotte's appearance—"bought beauty"! What 60-year-old woman needs a vanity license plate that spells out "FOXY"?

Monalee considered bolting to Al's Market and Superdeli, just to avoid Charlotte, but Al's prices were through the roof. She thought about the likelihood of running into the woman and then remembered something. Charlotte, all 97 pounds of her, preferred to shop the perimeter of the store, telling anyone who would listen that this shopping strategy—produce, protein, pharmacy—was key to her figure, which Monalee thought looked more like gaunt greyhound than glamorous

Grable. Monalee believed she could slip into the store, grab the white vinegar, and head for express checkout without ever seeing Charlotte.

Once inside the store, Monalee rounded the corner to aisle 5 and spotted the vinegar. Just as she turned toward the checkout, gallon in hand, she came face to face with Charlotte.

"Monalee! How are you?" Charlotte asked, pink-painted lips spread into a high-beam smile, exposing teeth as brilliantly white and blocky as Chiclets.

"I'm doing well, Charlotte. And you?" Monalee smiled in return, though with far less enthusiasm and fewer teeth.

"I'm fine. I had to grab some vinegar for brine. Ford's garden just keeps pumping out pickling cucumbers. I'm up to my ears in pickles—dill pickles, hamburger pickles, sweet pickles, spears, and chips," explained Charlotte. Ford was short for Stanford, her husband, the man who funded the restoration project that was his wife. She looked inquiringly at the jug in Monalee's hand.

"I'm making potato salad for tomorrow's brunch and realized that I didn't have a drop in the house."

"Is that *your* potato salad at the brunch every year?" Charlotte asked, a compliment on the tip of her tongue.

"Oh, no. Alice Thayer brought that potato salad for years," Monalee explained with a tinge of sorrow in her voice.

Charlotte nodded her head in understanding. "That'll be a hard act to follow. Alice's potato salad was legendary. Some of the ladies go in for seconds. We had to keep Lu Trevor from thirds last year," Charlotte said. "She's a big eater, completely shameless."

Monalee felt the familiar prick of underappreciation, and the disappointment radiated to her face. Recognizing this, Charlotte backpedaled instinctively. "Everyone will love yours, too, I'm

sure!" An awkward moment of silence followed. Charlene looked at her cart nervously and then said, "I'd better get back to those pickles."

Monalee watched Charlotte retreat, her cinched waist accentuated by a knotted shirt and slim-fitting capris. She muttered, "Pickles! She's not putting up pickles. I never see her pickles at the county fair, and everyone knows she's a ribbon hound."

On the drive back to her house, Monalee thought long and hard about the Dottie Camps and Charlotte Foxwells of the world. While not overtly cruel, an undercurrent of harshness marked every conversation, every interaction. With Esther Denny's passing, would she now be the target of this nuanced spitefulness? At moments like this, Monalee really missed Esther.

Once back in her kitchen, Monalee retrieved the eggs from the refrigerator and placed them in a pot of water. She turned the knob on her old gas range and eventually a blue flame *whooshed* under the pot. As she waited for the eggs to boil, Monalee went to the lazy Susan, found the bottle of vodka, and poured her first drink of the day.

Monalee awoke with dawn's first light beaming brightly through the kitchen window. Addled, she lifted her head from the tabletop, rubbing her temples as soon as she felt the familiar throbbing of a "next-morning" headache. Her mouth felt dry, as though she'd been chewing woolen cud. Where had the hours gone?

She surveyed her kitchen—hard-boiled eggs languished in cold water, a bone-dry vodka bottle lay on the kitchen table, puddles of melted ice dotted the kitchen floor.

"No, no, no! The brunch is in a few hours," Monalee said aloud. She looked at the Yukon Golds in the bushel basket and twisted her lips in despair. How was she ever going to get the potatoes peeled and boiled in time?

Monalee's first inclination was to forego the potato salad altogether. She could make egg salad sandwiches, for she had all the ingredients. Or, she could bust tail to the Piggly Wiggly and buy the ingredients for Watergate salad. That would be the simplest solution. But at least three

people—Dottie Camp, Adelaide Morrow, and Charlotte Foxwell—expected the potato salad. Charlotte would be suspicious, eventually assuming some culinary cataclysm had beset Monalee. Mushy potatoes or spoiled Miracle Whip, something of that nature ruining the entire batch. Charlotte would whisper her skepticism to the gossipmongers Lu Trevor, Toss McGee, Helen Judson, and likely twenty other women, each adding their own splash of supposition, dash of venom.

Suddenly, an idea came to her. As she was rearranging the root cellar recently, she had noted the home-canning that had gone uneaten over the past few years, her interest waning after her husband left town in that beat-up Oldsmobile, never to be seen by her again. It's true, Monalee knew, that she relied on fast food more and more lately, leaving the home-canned goods untouched. She descended the stairs to the basement, opened the creaky door of the root cellar, and looked at the jar-laden shelves: beans, beets, corn, potatoes. Quarts of potatoes!

Monalee questioned quietly, "Why not use these potatoes in the salad? They're already cooked, ready to go." She lifted a jar to eye level and scrutinized the contents. Her lips slid into a smile. Without a moment's delay, she ferried jar after jar upstairs, whistling merrily, her problem solved.

Monalee popped lids from quart jars and dumped the contents of each into a strainer, allowing the liquid in the jars to run into the sink's drain. She transferred the potatoes into a cafeteria-size mixing bowl and then set about peeling and chopping hard-boiled eggs. Though she had no memory of removing the eggs from the stovetop the night before, the shells slid from the eggs easily, and they were perfectly cooked, yolks vibrant and creamy. She diced celery and onion. Once the ingredients had been combined and thoroughly blended, a taste test revealed tender potatoes and motley flavors just beginning to meld. By 9:00, the potato salad was chilling in the Frigidaire.

The brunch proved a roaring success for Monalee, her potato salad the star of the show. Even Charlotte Foxwell's clutch of gossipy hens offered kind words amid mouthfuls of the salad. Unsurprisingly, Lu Trevor made a third trip to the serving line. Though Monalee heard a smattering of approvals for other dishes, by and large, the day's accolades were aimed squarely at her, and she devoured the praise. So dazzled was Monalee in this dream state of commendation that she dared not partake of the potato salad, potentially robbing herself of further flattery.

"Take that, Dottie and Charlotte, Lu and Toss. Take that, all of you!" Monalee thought. Petty, indeed!

By Wednesday, just two days later, the hot glow of accomplishment had dimmed, and life had returned to normal. Monalee sulked as she guided the Electrolux over her deep-pile carpets, creating wheel tracks as ruler-straight and evenly spaced as a musical staff; she brooded as her feather-duster glanced the porcelain trinkets on her mantelpiece.

By that afternoon, intriguing grist had begun to grind in the town's rumor mill. Monalee managed only to snag bits and pieces from the usual sources—Jolly Monroe, who schlepped mail in her neighborhood, and Phil Britton, who supplied her with fresh eggs and herbs. A few church ladies called, but they added little detail to the building scandal. Since Esther Denny died, Monalee was often the last to know anything, it seemed. Though not always a reliable historian, Esther's enthusiasm often elevated her storytelling to performance art.

She managed to gather that several members of the Methodist Women's Circle were hauled to Albert County Regional Hospital with "nerve problems." Toss McGee was seeing double and caterwauling pitifully. Charlotte Foxwell's vision was blurry and parts of her face previously unfazed by cosmetic injections now seemed impossibly frozen. Mamie Flint, Adelaide Morrow's mother, had been placed in a medical-induced coma, a tube thrust down her windpipe to regulate her breathing. Poor Mamie, Monalee thought. Dottie Camp, with breathing already compromised from pleurisy scarring and a two-pack-a-day habit, clung to life.

“What was happening?” Monalee wondered.

That evening she turned on the local news. The banner stretched across the bottom of the screen read “BREAKING NEWS: FOODBORNE OUTBREAK SUSPECTED AT CHURCH FUNCTION.” Anchorman Mitch Fellows, Fay’s oldest grandson, outlined the grim scenario, confirming details that Monalee had strung together earlier. Her interest piqued when she learned that samples of food waste, removed carefully from garbage collected at Amsden Methodist Church, were being tested for possible toxins. According to Mitch Fellows, the Centers for Disease Control ordered vials of botulism antitoxin from the federal government.

Vials of botulism antitoxin? That sounded dreadful, Monalee mused solemnly, even if she didn’t know exactly what it meant.

Monalee leaned back in her La-Z-Boy. She ached for a drink—for that first swallow of vodka to ignite her tonsils and burn her esophagus—but that would have to wait, at least for now. She closed her eyes but had no intention of sleeping. Instead, she thought back to the day Ennis Morrow unloaded those potatoes from his rusted-out Chevy. Not a week ago, but that autumn day last year. The looming work had put Monalee in a low mood. Processing two bushels of potatoes can make bone-on-bone knees scream in protest, and she knew of only one way to blunt the pain.

Snippets of that day surfaced in her memory. She remembered filling her kitchen sink with hot water, bathing the quart jars in soap-suds, and carefully rinsing until the water ran clear. She filled the huge kettles three-quarters full of water; the jars would displace the water, eventually covering them completely. She peeled and diced the potatoes, packing them tightly into the jars, allowing a one-inch headspace. She wiped the rims of the jars with white vinegar before she fit the lids and the rings, being cautious to not wring the rings too aggressively. She consulted her old canning manual, the one she picked up at Goodwill, to verify the processing time.

She began to wonder about those things she didn't recall from that day: the wild jiggle of the weights on the pressure canner, the release of steam from the petcock vent, the usual fight to unbolt the canner lid, arthritis pounding in her knuckles.

Monalee rose from the recliner and grabbed her home-canning guide—not the dog-eared one from Goodwill but the modern one. Her finger slid down the index page until she landed on “potatoes.” She turned to those pages, reading and rereading the instructions. Pressure can, pressure can, pressure can! Tears welled in her eyes.

The phone rang, releasing her from further reflection. “Hello,” Monalee said quietly.

“This is Lorraine Scarlett from Amsden Methodist, calling to pass along a prayer request.”

“Yes,” Mona replied tentatively, as she fidgeted with the twisted phone cord.

“Dottie Camp passed. Will you please keep her family in your prayers?”

Tears tracked down Monalee's cheeks. She managed to squeak out, “Of course, thank you.”

Monalee descended the stairs to her basement and found her emergency bottle in the root cellar. Back upstairs, she sank low into the recliner, pulling a blanket to her chin and pulling her first swig from the bottle. What path would she take, she wondered.

The next morning, Monalee woke, her head thrumming, the effects of last night's binge at full volume. Despite this, she gathered her wits and called the Albert County Health Department. A receptionist answered.

“I don't know where to begin,” Monalee said, apprehensively.

The receptionist encouraged Monalee to continue, giving her more time to suss out whether this was a legitimate caller or a prankster. “Go on, ma'am.”

“I may be to blame, but it was an accident, the worst kind of accident.” Monalee explained, as tears blurred her vision.

“Ma'am, help me understand what you're talking about.”

“The potato salad at the church brunch,” Monalee went on, her weeping intensifying.

The operator understood instantly, as news of foodborne illness was everywhere—television reports, community Facebook groups, water coolers. “What is your name, ma’am?”

“My name is Monalee Saylor.” She paused and then said, “Ask anyone, the potato salad was delicious. I received thirty-three compliments. Thirty-three! I bet that’s a record.”