

Aunt Iola and Brenda Celebrate Cinco de Mayo

May 4, 2017

April was in full swing in Ishpeming, Michigan. The birds were singing in the trees once more, even in the neighborhood where Iola and Brenda lived. Their street had been devoid of avian choirs for nearly half-a-year due to all the indigenous fowl being frightened into silence and hiding by a thundering explosion the previous December. How the word had spread to vacationing robins, bluebirds, chickadees, and other warm-weather featherdusters isn't known and may never be, but it did result in them being hesitant to return to the quiet street where the two friends lived.

But now that was past and life was good again. People walked their dogs with their heads held high -- something that had ceased for some time. People had still exercised their pooches, of course, but for nearly two months they'd done so while keeping their heads down and looking nervously around so they could duck and cover if any more domesticated ostriches or fizzy beverage bottles unexpectedly detonated. Children played in their yards on bright green grass, no longer hoping for the fun and excitement of unplanned cannonades that rattled windows and bounced little old ladies out of their beds. Father Daniels, pastor of the First Lutheran Church, had even stopped petitioning his superiors to transfer him to another parish -- his fear had faded with time, and once the food bank story had spread no minister would touch the position with a ten-foot communion bread cube anyway so it looked like he might be officiating there until he retired. Bert Corby, Fire Chief of the local hook-and-ladder club for eighteen years, had taken an early retirement and moved his wife to Canada where they don't celebrate Thanksgiving, and rumor has it that he won't allow any birds larger than a robin to grace his refrigerator, nor any bottles of root beer, for reasons that are not relevant to this account.

Into this serene and bucolic picture we now introduce an X-factor: Brenda's obsession with an Internet game. In and of itself that's hardly a worrisome thing, but dear Brenda chose to buy credits to augment her jewel-blasting skills, thereby inadvertently causing an overdraft to her checking account and making the check to the cable company bounce. Again, not a catastrophe, but it did result in her cable signal being cut-off for a few days while the mess got straightened out.

During those cable-less days Brenda spent more time than usual at Aunt Iola's house to watch her television. On one such day Iola got a call from a relative and sat in her kitchen to talk, leaving Brenda in the tiny living room with the clicker. And the National Geographic channel that just happened to be doing a story about Mexican history.

Cinco de Mayo, Mexico's Independence Day, is celebrated on May 5. The hullabaloo includes parades, costumes, fireworks, and lots of special spicy foods. It looked like a colorful, exciting party to Brenda, and in the spirit of fun and international *bon homme* she decided she and Iola should try a traditional Mexican meal. Of course, the closest either woman had ever come to traditional Mexican food had been wrapped in wax paper with a picture of a bell on it, but Brenda's intentions were pure and honorable. It was her lack of understanding about Tex-Mex spices that messed-up the equation.

- 2 -

Father Daniels had seen few truly troubled souls in his years in Ishpeming. The town just wasn't a hotbed of sins of the flesh. Oh, a few people might take an extra drink on occasion or cheat Uncle Sam out of a few dollars come April 15, but as a rule the worst problems he saw in his duties were that the altar cloths were getting a bit ratty and should be replaced. Consequently he didn't

generally worry if an unexpected knock came to his office door. Of course it's when you let your guard down that trouble comes calling.

This particular afternoon the good Father was preparing notes for an upcoming sermon when he was summoned, and when he opened his door to find Brenda Svenson standing there he was only slightly disturbed. As was his custom when dealing one-on-one with a female parishioner he didn't invite her into his private office, but instead went to sit with her in the church sanctuary. Befitting his noble office he did his level best not to anticipate what she was going to bring to his attention but, truth be told, there was a nagging fear in the back of his mind that she was going to tell him she'd decided to come clean to Homeland Security and wanted him to go along for moral support.

Brenda explained about the NatGeo program she'd seen and how colorful and festive the holiday decorations were, then launched full-tilt into a spiel about cultural diversity and that the world's a village and we should all try to understand each other and wouldn't it be grand if, and somewhere around the thirtieth paragraph Father Daniels started hearing ocean waves on the beach. So perhaps he may be forgiven for agreeing to something he didn't fully understand when he allowed that a Cinco de Mayo potluck lunch at the church sounded like a fine idea. He probably never even heard himself saying he'd address the issue at the committee meeting two nights hence.

- 3 -

At first, Aunt Iola wasn't that keen on the idea of the Cinco de Mayo potluck lunch. She wasn't against the idea so much as the date -- she already had plans that evening and couldn't they hold Cinco on Ocho instead? But Brenda suggested having the party right after Sunday worship service instead of in the evening and that went some considerable distance towards settling that issue. She even had a tentative recipe in-line: Chicken and Black Beans with Peppers in nacho cheese sauce. During their discussion of this choice both women agreed that it sounded very tasty. But I have told you that neither of them was exactly the brightest bulb on the tree, haven't I? Keep that in mind.

So the Church Activities and Concerns Committee met and talked and agreed that a Cinco de Mayo celebration sounded fun and educative and inclusive. Several volunteers agreed to handle the details, funds were allocated, and the boulder began rolling downhill and picking up speed. Posters were designed and printed by the church secretary, good soul that he was, and appropriate decorations were ordered. The event was announced in the church's worship service bulletin and about a hundred families penciled it in on their calendars for May 5.

In the interim Brenda and Iola weren't idle either. They began collecting ingredients for their culinary masterpiece, some of which were so rare in Ishpeming that the two friends had to drive all the way over to Winthrop Junction to get them. It was all coming together, but not quite to Brenda's approval. She was adamant that this Chicken and Black Beans with Peppers be the best of its kind to ever grace any Michigander's palate. This was what led the two women to attempt to ramp-up the heat of their masterpiece with some hotter peppers.

Gentle reader, let me interrupt a moment to explain how the chemical heat in peppers is measured. The rating is expressed in "Scoville Units;" the more Scovilles, the hotter the pepper. Many people are familiar with habenero peppers -- they're even used in fast food chain burgers, they're that commonly used -- and habeneros range 100,000 - 350,000 Scovilles. That's what Brenda ordered from the "Green Phantom's Peppers" website to put into the chicken. But when she was typing in the information she made a slight miscalculation and ordered a jar of diced Carolina Reaper peppers...and

the Carolina Reaper comes in at 2,200,000 Scovilles. It was these brilliantly red nuclear bombs that would find their way into the chicken dish with the black beans and diced tomatoes.

It was May 4 and Iola and Brenda were busy in Brenda's kitchen. The air was redolent with scents of tomatoes and roasting chicken as Brenda brought out the glass jar of chopped red Reaper pieces. Following the instructions that had come with the jar she pulled on the plastic food service gloves and twisted the lid. It opened with a POP and in moments the whole kitchen had a new scent -- something menacing and cruel enough that the pyramidal arborvitae in front of Brenda's house all leaned away from the building just in case the chemical spill they sensed leaked out of the house.

So it was that the pound of hot peppers that were supposed to spice Brenda's Cinco de Mayo Chicken Surprise were replaced by bits of concentrated supernovas. The casserole dish had no clue to what use it was being put, the oven was completely clueless and above blame. The silver spoon that was used to stir the virulent brew could be said to be an accomplice since it did tarnish at the touch of the peppers but since neither Brenda nor Iola noticed it could be said to be innocent due to ignorance. And when the tomatoes baked they gave off such savory aroma that the peppers' scent was overwhelmed and concealed. So the Carolina Reapers rested in their delicious bath like diamondback rattlesnakes hiding in the shade waiting for something living and warm to sink their venomous fangs into. Iola and Brenda went into the parlor to play some cards while the casserole cooked, and an hour later when the timer went off to signal them Brenda had just played the winning card -- the Ace of Spades.

- 4 -

Sunday broke as pretty as any May Sunday anyone at the First Lutheran Church of Ishpeming could remember. Hundreds of people converged on the church for services and the promised Cinco luncheon and the air of the place was one of happy fellowship. Father Daniels was proud as a new papa to see such a crowd in his sanctuary and he resolved to give them a great sermon in hope that any visitors who'd come for lunch could be persuaded to come back every week. He visited the church kitchen to check on the Preparation Committee's handling of heating the hot foods, stirring up the cold foods, laying out the crockery and silverware and all the little things that add up to big things at an event like this. He passed between the steel tables in the kitchen, saying his good mornings to the volunteers and looking at the dishes presented, and everything went well until he passed the wide oven where Brenda and Iola's casserole lay bubbling beside several other offerings. For some reason he did something he'd never done before in his whole life as a Lutheran; as he passed the oven he had the irresistible urge to cross himself...so he did.

Thinking back on that beautiful Sunday most people at the church would have pleasant memories of the service. The choir sang with great passion and nearly everybody was on pitch. During the children's sermon none of the kiddies wet their pants or said anything embarrassing about their parents. None of the ushers had an earphone playing the weekly game in his ear as he collected the offering. Before the first hymn was over the marvelous scents from the kitchen were drifting up into the sanctuary and people, some of whom had skipped breakfast to have empty belly room for the free food, were trying not to drool. And yes, the pastor was surely touched by the hand of God that day because once he got rolling he went with it.

Father Daniels had planned to talk about "The Brotherhood of Mankind" to coincide with the theme of inclusiveness demonstrated by the Cinco de Mayo celebration. And he did. He talked about love that goes beyond borders or labels or ideologies. He talked about reaching out to others and trying

to understand them and where they were coming from. He talked about not judging another person until you'd walked a mile in his shoes. He talked about how God loves us all and that we should try to be like Him. He got all that out of his system and if he'd stopped right there just maybe the rest of the day might've been more heavenly and less diabolical. But as I said the hand of God was on him and he took off on oratorical wings into the stratosphere and talked about how many Philistines Samson slew who might've been spared if they'd just talked it all out instead of all that 'knocking down the temple' business. He talked about how Noah tried to wise his neighbors to what was promised and if they'd listened to his warnings they might've built a few boats of their own. He talked about Pharaohs and Prophets and pyramids and pussycats (and why they're not in the Bible).

The minister ministered way longer than expected and a good twenty minutes before he closed his sermon the sound of stomachs growling in the sanctuary threatened to drown-out the final hymn, "Let Us Break Bread Together (on Our Knees)." He reminded everyone that the Cinco de Mayo luncheon was laid out downstairs and that the rules were to fill your plate but no eating -- even tasting -- until the food had been blessed, then he rubbed his tummy and smiled. "Save me some," he joked, then he gave the benediction but he was saying that to a lot of backs and fannies because the rapacious congregants were already stampeding for the fellowship hall. He stared at the exit doors for a moment as though he expected to see a cartoon dust cloud, then he retreated to his office and took off his robe and surplice. For a moment he considered removing his tie as well, but he was still wearing it and his wireless clip-on mic when he hustled down to lunch.

- 5 -

By the time Father Daniels arrived in the sanctuary all the seats at the long tables were filled. A hundred or so parishioners of various ages were waiting for their food, and volunteers were pushing along wheeled trolleys of steaming plates of a variety of foods, passing out Chinest plates and cups of coffee, juice, or iced tea, and reminding everyone no tasting 'til the blessing was over. He sat down beside his wife and their son at the end of their usual table, then smiled beatifically at his flock and sniffed the spicy aromas permeating the air. This was gonna be great, he was sure.

A hundred faces turned towards him as the last few plates were placed before their eager consumers. He raised his hands and his voice, saying, "Our gracious God, we thank you for this opportunity to gather in friendship and..." and when he finally got around to "In Christ's name, amen," the room full of hungry souls fell to with a feverish fervor rarely seen in that part of Michigan.

It was very nice at first. Diners mostly started on the main dishes -- the tamales or beef enchiladas or shredded pork tortillas were all wonderful and a harmonious and heavenly "Mmmmmm" filled the room as tongues discovered the flavors of Mexico. The church was a happy place indeed.

A few adventurous folks who had found Brenda and Iola's chicken dish on their plate tried that first, but the volcanic qualities of the casserole weren't immediately evident. Apparently the cheese sauce sort-of insulated everybody's taste buds for a few moments. Just long enough for the rest of the recipients of Brenda's Infernal Pollo to start eating it too. Then a lot of mouths discovered that Carolina Reaper peppers deserved their ignominious reputation.

It seemed to Father Daniels that he was present at a recreation of the Biblical the Holy Spirit touching members of the assembly (Acts 2:3) with tongues of fire. At first on his right, then on his left, then another on his left, and more and more sprinkled around the room diners' expressions of pleasure

became moans of discomfort...and far, far worse.

Pain makes us wise and so we could say that the room began to fill with mighty smart people. From the Murphy's 6-year-old twins to Mrs. Harland, who was almost old enough to have sold wood to a boat-builder named Noah, voices of mortal agony began to rise and panic began to spread. Nearly everyone either was certain that Lucifer was stoking the coals on their tongue or next to someone who was, and the chaos and pandemonium of people seeing their beloved family members' mouth being immolated spread like...well, like wildfire.

Tongues were doused with juice and tea and coffee, none of which could cut the oily capsicum of the Reaper peppers, but instead washed the essence around, turning more of the victim's mouth into an inferno. Shrieking erupted all around the room and nobody's voice was louder than the pastor's. The gentle, strong man had also been stricken and succumbed, and from the sounds spouting from him one could conclude that the deepest pits of Tartarus never saw a hotter flame than what his tonsils were hosting right then.

Exodus, meaning a massed exit from a place, would be a term to describe a good third of the diners jumping up and dashing for the two little bathrooms in the church basement. A better word would be "stampede." Immediately both lavatories were full of people, and a minute later so were the two restrooms upstairs, and Father Daniels was in the kitchen hanging his head in the sink and wondering how his Sunday went so wrong so suddenly. That's where he was when the peppery casserole he'd swallowed detonated.

The optimistic thing to consider is that most of the assemblage were in the bathrooms or trying to get in there or were in the parking lot in misery or worrying about somebody in one of those places, so not many people were paying attention to the loudspeakers in the fellowship hall and every classroom. They weren't listening to those speakers, which were used to carry the service and sermon to the entire church, courtesy of the wireless microphone the pastor wore every Sunday morning as he taught his flock. The unfortunate part of it all was that Father Daniels was still wearing his mic as he bent over the rim of the stainless steel sink in the kitchen and that the edge of that sink had nudged the little button on the mic to ON. The dead-worst part of it is what sounds that sensitive device picked up in that kitchen as the minister's digestive tract ran in panic and started to blast vociferous exhaust that sounded a bit like the biggest tuba ever made connected to the back end of a very bilious elephant that had won the bean eating contest. That's right. Loud and wet and heard in every part of the little church on that Sunday afternoon.

And at one side of the room sat Brenda and Iola, two best friends, having not started their meal yet because they'd been working in the kitchen, staring at the mishagas and wondering what the heck was going on.

Happy Cinco, ya'll!

This story is a work in progress, but for the moment it's "finished." If I think of a different ending at some point Ill change it, but for now...