

Tomato Love

by C. KEVIN SMITH

The tomato arrived in a small, brown cardboard box, wrapped in plain white paper. There was no note, only the familiar handwriting on the box: from my father, to me. He had begun planting tomatoes again, and this one, he knew, was one of the seasons best.

My father grew up in rural Missouri during the Depression. Missouri soil is famously fertile, which was a good thing for my father's family, because sometimes the only thing to eat was whatever they could grow. Now, years later, after divorce and relocation, retirement and a period of unsettled confusion, he had planted tomatoes in the tiny yard next to his trailer, in Santa Monica. He also tended to some tomato plants a few blocks away, belonging to a ninety-year-old woman he had met at the local senior's center.

He would speak to me of these tomatoes, on the phone and in letters, marking their passage from seed to bud, from fruit to supper, his words expressing a quiet, confident satisfaction. The world might go to hell, but with proper care a beautiful tomato could be cultivated and enjoyed. He and I were past the phase of mutual bewilderment and suspicion that had begun in my teens and lasted a decade or so, and I appreciated these conversations. He might feel lonely at times; his tomatoes, at least, still needed him.

I opened the box and took out the tomato. I knew this was a prize specimen: smooth, unblemished skin, stretched taut over flesh that yielded but was not too soft, its deep, red color promising pleasure. It smelled powerfully of sweetness and tang, sunlight and dirt. I felt a curious mixture of tickled delight and worried awe for what my father had done, sending a single ripe tomato via the U.S. Mail—astonishment, too, that it had traveled hundreds of miles without acquiring the slightest bruise or tear.

It was a large tomato. I held it in one hand, its base easily covering my palm, and felt the heaviness of its juices. I set it on the kitchen counter to let it rest after its journey. I wanted to eat it at just the right time.

In the 1970s, my father became interested in organic gardening, but I don't recall him growing tomatoes. Corn, squash, green beans, chard, also a brief period devoted to fruit trees. I haven't asked him about this, but I think his current involvement with tomatoes has something to do with his Missouri boyhood, some seed of his life then, perhaps long forgotten, now once again bearing fruit. To be a grower of tomatoes one must have considerable skill, knowledge, sensitivity to the elements, patience. But to produce a tomato that is truly great, one must have something else: an intuitive attachment to the soil, a sixth sense of what makes things live. Children, who are by necessity close to the ground, often have this kind of understanding, or belief. But as we grow and take on responsibilities this connection is easily lost.

There is one other important ingredient in the creation of a successful tomato. It is love. This is what I tasted in abundance as I held my head over the kitchen sink, some hours after the tomato's arrival, when I could stand to wait no longer. I bit into the fruit of my father's labor, sweet and sharp, and felt a burst of gratitude to have a father who always did, and would still, provide.