

The Cult of the Fresh Tomato

I wait all summer for the tomatoes to ripen. I enjoy the whole gardening process – tilling the soil, mixing in the compost, digging in the soil with my naked fingers to place the baby plants in their little holes – but it’s the eating that makes it all worth it. A bite of rich red flesh with juice dripping from my chin.

This summer I had a particularly good crop. I planted twelve plants, bound to produce a veritable orgy of fruit. I had Big Boys, Early Girls, Romas and even a couple of the yellow ones that I have to close my eyes to eat so they’ll taste right. The plants sprouted branches full of leaves and blossoms early, and by the end of May my garden was so lush I half-expected to hear the screech of monkey coming from the interior as I walked past.

I noticed my neighbor scowling at my jungle as he watered his lawn, a perfect expanse of emerald green cut as short as a Marine recruit’s hair.

“Don’t you like tomatoes?” I’d been dying to talk him anyway. He looked younger up close than I had thought. Not even a trace of five o’clock shadow at seven thirty at night.

“Not really. They’re kind of messy. I don’t cook much.” He averted his gaze to the waiting lawn. Work to be done and all that.

“You don’t have to cook tomatoes. They’re just perfect raw.” I leaned way over and pulled one off the nearest plant, twisting it slowly so the little stem on top stayed intact. I held it up to show him. “Look at how gorgeous she is.”

I took his hose from him and washed the tomato off. The spray blasted the little beauty clean, wetting the front of my t-shirt with cold water. I was careful not to get one drop on him.

“Look at that color; it’s exquisite. And I bet you a dollar that it’s just as firm and red on the inside as it is outside.” I looked him in the eye and bit into it, biting in with my bottom teeth first so juice would run down to the ground instead of spurting out at him. I showed him the inside the fruit as I chewed. He looked to the ground.

“I have to finish watering, then trim my bushes.” He motioned to the side of his house, where his very square boxwoods stood at attention.

“Okay. See ya.” I smiled at him and took another wet bite of my tomato. I watched him walk away, carrying his hose behind him. He glanced over his shoulder midway to the house to see if I was still looking at him. I was.

That evening, after I had weeded and watered all my plants, I picked some tomatoes. I washed them carefully and chose the three prettiest ones, completely round, with their little hats of stem and leaves still attached. I checked his house to see that he was inside, then placed them on his back door step with a note.

The next day after work, he rang my door bell. “Thank you for the tomatoes, but I really won’t eat them. I’d hate to see them go to waste.” He smiled a little, then studied his shoes.

I took them back from him, one by one, and placed them in my shirt, pulled up by the bottom seam to form a pouch. I looked down. “I’m sorry. I just have so many.” I looked up again. “Won’t you even try one?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t like them. But it doesn’t mean . . . it doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate the thought.” He smiled again. I smiled back.

“Okay. See ya.” I backed into the house and closed the screen door. I watched him walk away again. He looked back over his shoulder again.

That Saturday I made a huge pot of marinara sauce. I opened my windows so I could smell the tomatoes and spices cooking as I sat out on my back porch with a glass of cabernet.

My neighbor was working in his yard again. He was using some sort of edger to ensure there was a ruler-straight line between the grass and his driveway. He was sweating a little, and I could see the sweat stains at his arm pits and in a narrowing line down his back. I wondered why he didn't wear shorts. I would have enjoyed that.

When he was finished, he noticed me watching him and came over, wiping his brow with the back of his hand and running his fingers through his damp hair in the front.

“That smells terrific.” He looked right into my eyes this time.

“Yeah, it's one of my favorite recipes. I have to come up with some way to use all those tomatoes since my neighbor won't help me eat them.” I dipped my finger in my wine and ran it around the outside of the glass.

He hesitated for a second, then said. “Well, I might be able to try that sauce.”

“Great. It's almost finished. I'll put some spaghetti on to boil and you can come over after you've showered. We'll eat out here on the porch.”

He agreed and I watched him head back to his house. He walked quickly and didn't think to look back at me.

He loved the sauce. He sopped up every last bit on his plate with a piece of bread, looking me in the eye and telling me about his job. He needed someone to listen. I believe in sharing anything good that I have with people, so I could surely lend him my ear for an hour.

Later, I poured a mason jar full of the sauce and sent it home with him.

The next morning I saw him checking out my plants when he got home from church, bending over to search for the ripe tomatoes amongst the greenery. I met him out there.

“Ready to try a raw one? Come on. Be a man about it.”

“I’ll get my good shirt dirty.” But he was interested.

“The tomatoes will wait for you to change. That’s a good thing about tomatoes. They’re patient.” I cocked my head at him.

“Okay, but only a little one. I’ll be back in a minute.” He turned and disappeared inside the house.

He came back out in a t-shirt and jeans, with a paper towel in his hand. “I’m ready.” He said.

I picked out two Romas, the size of large eggs, and washed them off at the spigot. I handed him one and kept one myself. “Wait a minute.” I said, then rushed into the house and returned with the salt shaker.

“I didn’t realize the tomatoes needed anything else.” He was teasing me now.

“They don’t need it, but I want it to be the best it can be for you.” I handed him the salt. “Now take a bite, then salt it and take your next bite. Trust me. You’ll be thanking me in a minute.”

He ate the tomato. He smiled. “You are so right about tomatoes.” I nodded.

I left some tomatoes on his doorstep that evening. When he came to my door to thank me, I invited him in. And in he came.

I have a new neighbor on the other side of my house. He drives a Volvo and is graying at the temples. He told me he has recently divorced, and his eyes tell me it wasn't his choice. We talked about my garden, and I offered him all the vegetables he wanted. He declined, saying he's a meat and potatoes man.

We'll see.