

Tomatoes

They come in summer, bursting forth from green vines. The round fruit bends the plants low to the ground, as if bowing. As if we, the gardeners, are gods accepting their offerings. The tomatoes collect in our basket, so red and ripe they could be organs. A red star, even. The weight of them in our hands is hefty, water-full. Back in the house, we wash them, slice them over rice. Any meat or an egg will do for protein. The taste is lush, earthy, a tinge acidic. It makes you want to thank the dirt and all its small residents. You might as well be eating a sun or a heart.

My grandfather, whom we affectionately call Lolo in Tagalog, loves tomatoes. He immigrated from the Philippines to New Mexico in early 1972, promising his wife and two children he would fetch them to join him once he had procured a nursing job and a stable income. When he arrived in New Mexico, he cried because of all the sand. He held it in his hands and despaired. Nothing would grow here. There were no vendors or markets. He thought he was going to die.

My Lolo did not yet understand that Americans bought food in grocery stores. He had grown up in Pangasinan, a province in the Philippines. You either grew your own food or you bought it from local vendors, who grew it themselves nearby. You could eat sugarcane like candy bars, my father once told me. You could cut a stalk of it from a field and eat it. The dirt there was thick, black, loamy. It was full of promise. Now, in the promised land, the land where the dreams were said to be growing out of the ground, there was nothing. Wasteland. No tomatoes.

My father tells me that tomatoes are the easiest thing to grow. They are simple, pedestrian. The majority of Lolo's garden is dedicated to growing this lowly fruit. And it has always been like this: Lolo grew a garden wherever he lived. He and his young family moved every few years as part of his job as a nurse in the Air Force: California, Missouri, again the Philippines, even a workaround for growing in sandy New

Mexico. Some years he grew corn, squash, or green beans. The garden changed from year to year, but there were always tomatoes.

Lolo fed my father and his siblings tomatoes most days for lunch. They were served with sardines, which Lolo told his children were “magical” because you could eat the bones. Most people think of sardines as junk food, cheap protein for poor people. Lolo saw them as a high end food, along with Spam, Vienna sausage, and corned beef. Even now, my father eats rice, tomatoes, and sardines most days for lunch.

When I cook for my roommates, I do not use sardines, or any sort of canned meat. It would be cheap of me. Nor do I use raw tomatoes: one of my roommates vehemently dislikes them. I think it is because she does not know what they can be—rich, cool, sweetly acidic. She has never had a homegrown tomato, thinks that they are all like the grocery store kind: mushy and bland with a chewy skin. No matter. Cooking for myself is a small celebration, easy in its execution. I do not know how to cook pancit, chicken adobo, or sinigang. But I know how to cook rice, an egg, and corned beef. I know how to slice a tomato.

My Lolo tells this story about tomatoes: It was Laos, during the Vietnam War. He was working as a nurse for Operation Brotherhood, an American group of Jesuits that employed Filipino nurses to help injured locals. He contracted malaria and was then hospitalized in the main city, Bin Tien. His luck worsened: fighting broke out in the city as part of the spreading Laotian civil war. Doctors, nurses, and patients abandoned the hospital, either to fight or seek safety. Lolo, asleep, missed the signal to leave. He woke, realized he was alone, and performed his own IV and transfusion. He needed to regain his strength, so he looked for something to eat. He went outside and saw a basket of ripe, glowing tomatoes left on the steps. They were not his, but he ate them. Who would stop him? Wide-eyed, he tells me, Those tomatoes saved my life! They were the best tomatoes I had ever eaten! And then he chuckles, so far from that time that it astonishes him.

Maybe this is why my Lolo, now retired from anesthesiology in Oklahoma, fills his backyard with dozens of tomato plants. He wakes early each morning to water the plants, tend their leaves, till the dirt. He has no tolerance for weeds. You can spy him through gaps in the foliage diligently picking out the offenders. He brings in bowls and bowls of tomatoes, arms laden with the feast. When we, his children and grandchildren visit him, we cut greedily into his labor. It spills red and thick over our rice. I often wonder what he thinks of us, sometimes throwing away tomato slices because we are already full. He never says anything about it.

There are many other stories I could tell you about my Lolo. That he graduated at the top of his anesthesiology class at WashU in 1977, but we did not know it until we found his award while rummaging in a closet. That his father was an alcoholic with more children than he could support. That Lolo's siblings still ask him, the eldest child and surrogate parent, for money. That he met his wife, my Lola, during the Vietnam War working as nurses. That Russel, my uncle, once spoke to my Lolo over the phone as a child while Lolo was still living alone in the US: Daddy, come home. Daddy, I miss you. And his heart broke, seeds spilling everywhere.

Perhaps my Lolo is proud to know that the generations following him feel so blithely about tomatoes. We love them, but we can throw them away so easily. Life and all of its promises are always spilling from our hands. We have gadgets, books, the nice kind of pencils for drawing. My Lolo used to steal paper towels out of the school bathroom to do his homework. We bring dozens of notebooks with us for passing notes to each other at night as we lay in sleeping bags in the living room. We are made of excess: bright, loud, joyous excess. I think he is happy that our lives hurt less; he does not resent us for it. Good that we have never had malaria in a hospital while conflict rages outside. Good that none of us can see our bones, that we have grown up with so many options we can turn our noses up at fully-cooked fish. Good that we have never been oceans apart, that our fathers kiss us goodnight, that education is a given and not a luxury. But

I want to be more grateful. I want to hold the labor of my mothers and fathers in my arms, kiss it so sweetly my mouth fills with juice.

And when I live in my own house, I will plant tomatoes in the summer.