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*Moorpark Review*, Spring 2008

## About the Tomato

There was nothing to suggest that the Altamont Sunshine Community was a hotbed of crime. The brochure called it an “age-qualified estate,” and some of the residents called it home, but everyone agreed it was quiet. Moments of repose could become whole days of repose. Sometimes people went to their eternal rest, but that didn’t make noise either. People talked about other things.

A few times a day, a car might glide along the curving drive in front of the white, three-story building. Behind the landscaped shrubs and the big window of the lobby, gray-haired people sat in armchairs, looking out at anyone who might be looking in. Sometimes a curtain in one of the rows of apartment windows would move aside, and watchful eyes would take an interest in any activity, to say nothing of any suspicious activity. There were flowers and vegetables quietly growing in the community garden down the hill past the drive. They should be safe.

And yet, Hetty Forsyth feared the worst. She knew people were capable of anything. There was that new resident who always hogged the best seat in the van to town, instead of taking turns like she should. Even her friend, Alice, would pretend to put money on the collection plate during Mass, but Hetty often sat next to her and knew for a fact that sometimes she hadn’t donated anything. And then there was Jim McDermott. He smoked his damn cigars next to her vegetables and gave the tomatoes tobacco wilt.

Hetty noticed movement out on the drive, and twitched her curtains aside to check. But it was only her next door neighbor with her walker. She couldn’t be on her way to the garden. The grass would stop her.

The wall clock said it was too early for breakfast. They wouldn’t start serving for another half an hour.

She had to decide whether to go anyway, and wait with the others poised to snag a good table. It wouldn’t do her veins a bit of good if all the chairs in the hall were taken, but the alternative was to wait by herself, which always seemed to take a lot longer.

She straightened her dear departed husband's picture on her photo shelf, and knew without having to think about it that he'd been gone twenty years and seven months now. She moved on. She wiped a speck of dust off her daughter's wedding photo. Her son's college graduation picture needed to be inched forward a bit, which knocked over one of the flock of grandkids. She straightened them all. They were cute little chiggers, smiling and eager. None of them looked like they were waiting for something.

She'd seen three of them just a few weeks ago, when her son had brought the tomato seedling for her garden. He'd called it a seedling, but it turned out to be a half-grown plant with a huge, gorgeous tomato already on it. Suddenly, Hetty was likely to be the first to harvest a good tomato this year. That'd show that old boaster, Jim McDermott.

"That," she said with satisfaction, "will show Jim."

At which point one of the granddaughters piped up,

"Aw gee, Grandma, are you growing tomatoes at somebody again this year?"

She stopped herself just in time from saying *You watch your manners, youngster*. Her son would get uncomfortable. But she couldn't let it pass.

"I'm just growing tomatoes. Jim's the one who always has to make noise about how big his are."

Hetty decided she'd wait for breakfast in line with the others rather than by herself in her room. She headed out the door, using the handrail in the long hallway just to be on the safe side.

"You ought to buy a cane, Hetty," said a thin, encouraging voice behind her. "Then you wouldn't have to worry."

Hetty took her hand off the rail at once and turned around. It was Alice. Alice was no bigger than a minute and wore a brown wig. Sometimes she had the wig on straight, and sometimes she didn't. Today was one of the skewed days. She didn't seem to mind either way. She had what people called a cheerful disposition.

"I'm not worrying," said Hetty. "I'm just walking. To breakfast." Only people who were old and decrepit used canes. Didn't Alice know that?

"I just had some good news," said Alice. "My daughter called, and she's bringing all her children over for my 73rd birthday."

"My son's kids are all coming up for Thanksgiving," Hetty countered.

Someone in the breakfast line heard her as the two of them approached, and had to chime in. She was exhausted, she said. All three of her granddaughters had brought their new babies during the Fourth of July weekend.

The minute hand of the clock met the six at last, proving that it was seven thirty, and everyone flooded toward the tables. The staff made feeble protests that it was too early, like they always did, but they knew when they were beaten.

"I think we should have a competition."

That was Jim, booming as usual, at the table right next to Hetty. He was almost as good as she was at snagging good tables.

“What kind of competition?” somebody at another table asked.

“Flowers and vegetables and things. We got a lot of good gardeners. We could even start a pool.”

None of the assembled women commented on the idea of betting.

“What?” said Jim.

“Well, really, Jim,” said Hetty. “Betting.”

“What’s wrong with that? I saw you at the church bingo just last Monday.”

“That’s at church,” she pointed out. The man didn’t seem to understand the simplest things.

“You just want to have a competition so you can boast about the size of your tomatoes,” said Alice to Jim, grinning knowingly and putting more butter on her bread roll than was good for her.

“Men,” muttered Hetty under her breath to Alice. “It’s always got to be about how mine is bigger than yours.”

“What, dear?” asked Alice. She was a bit deaf, and her hearing aid was in her far ear.

Jim, however, was not deaf, so Hetty couldn’t just say it again, louder. She edited on the fly.

“Mine’s the biggest one out there.”

“See?” said Jim. “Hetty’s all for it. Only don’t go counting your chickens, young lady. There’s a coupla weeks to go before they’re ripe.”

“Mine,” said Hetty, “is way ahead of yours. And chickens don’t get ripe.”

“They don’t get wilt, or rot, or leaf curl, either.”

“Well, when you know how to take care of things, they don’t go bad like that. They come out well.” Like all her children, for instance, as opposed to that good-for-nothing son of McDermott’s, the rich banker, or whatever he was, who never did more than send a card at Christmas.

“They haven’t come out yet, is all I’m sayin.”

*Oh, yes, they have,* Hetty wanted to retort, but a well-brought-up person didn’t say things like that. She sat silent and straight while she ate her ham and scrambled eggs, which said it for her.

But Jim McDermott had unsettled her. She set off for the vegetable garden after breakfast to check on things. He might have been doing more than smoking at her best plants, for all she knew. He might have been sneaking extra water on them, to make sure they did get rot and wilt. He’d seemed awfully sure of himself.

Besides, her prize tomato was only a day or two away from perfect. She’d pick it now, and let it ripen the rest of the way at home, on her window sill. That way it would be safe.

She left the nice smooth surface of the drive, and began the death-defying trek down to the garden. Other people got medals for that sort of thing; old people just carried on. Hetty did. She’d always been a determined sort. The grass was slippery and crowded with ankle-turning tufts. This would be a lot easier with a cane she admitted to herself since there was nobody around.

Everything looked okay in the garden when she stopped for a moment to study the way ahead. Everything looked okay when she picked her way down the row between her plants. But when she reached her son's plant, the one that never failed to warm her heart, there was no big, ripe tomato on it.

There was only a stem left. It had been cut clean off.

This wasn't a raccoon, or some wretched bird taking one peck and ruining the whole thing. This was a person. This was someone who wanted a fresh tomato and didn't care where they got it.

There were footprints here and there, but they all looked like small ones. Jim was a big fellow who usually left tracks even on the beaten paths. There was no way to guess who might have done it. Nor could she call the police to search every room for a tomato.

She might as well face it. One more thing she cared about was gone. She could wait for the hard little green ones on the vine to grow. She could wait for Jim to stop talking about his bigger and better harvest. She could wait, as always, because there was nothing else to do, and she could try not to think too much about what she was waiting for.

She turned, and climbed the hill, stopping for breath now and again.

