

# Tomatoes Are Fruit

-by-  
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We were learning about vegetables in school: what made a vegetable a vegetable, how we should eat lots of them, how they grew, and whatnot. Vegetables grew in the ground, they were roots; fruits came off trees and had seeds. So when mother sent me to school with a million tomatoes from our garden—not for the class project but to get rid of them, as our freezer was already overflowing with Ziploc bags full of frozen tomato sauce, the pantry filled with jars of homemade ketchup, and dessert every night a slice of creepy mock apple pie made with green tomatoes—I protested. In class we had just learned that tomatoes, though not typically served for dessert, were a fruit, because they had seeds.

Our teacher, Miss White, had sent home a note earlier in the week asking that parents send to school with their children various types of vegetables to be used in a project, the finale to “Vegetable Week.” The note did not say what we would do with the vegetables, and guessing was part of the fun. Guessing helped build anticipation, which always led to disappointment. When we were told we’d be doing a popcorn project, Jeremy Couch suggested that maybe we were going to pop a whole bunch of popcorn, fill up the classroom, and jump around in it. We did pop corn in class, but there wasn’t nearly enough to jump in. We were each given a Dixie cup to fill and offered various toppings, like Kool-Aid, salt, and cheese powder, to sprinkle on it, then we ate it while we watched *Where the Red Fern Grows*, choking on it as we sobbed when the dogs died.

Miss White was the youngest and prettiest teacher of first grade. All the other teachers had big flat butts and wore khaki high-waisted pants. Miss White wore pretty dresses and had long brown hair; she wanted vegetables and I wanted to please her. But mother insisted. She said if we couldn’t use the tomatoes in class then the teacher could take them home, or the students could take them home. “But they won’t want them!” I shouted, for which I was reprimanded. And so that morning I walked up the sandy sagebrush-covered hill to school extra slow, bogged down by a backpack full of tomatoes and a lunchbox containing

one lunch and two tomatoes and a shopping bag full of tomatoes and a zucchini. I considered leaving the tomatoes in the empty lot; I could hide them inside a tumbleweed. But the kids would probably find them. They’d throw them all over the street like they did with the pumpkins every Halloween, then I’d get in trouble for leaving them there and causing a mess to happen. So I decided I’d be a good girl and just bring the damn tomatoes to school.

On the way up the hill the kids who passed me asked me why I had so many tomatoes. I told them I needed them for school. They asked me why I needed so many tomatoes. I told them the note didn’t say. They asked what note, and I said the note that the teacher sent home, and they asked me who my teacher was, and I told them Miss White, and they asked why she wanted us to bring tomatoes to school, and I said that she wanted us to bring vegetables, and since these were older kids, they must’ve already learned about vegetables, because they informed me, as I already knew, that tomatoes were not vegetables but fruit, because they had seeds, and I said that I knew that, that my mother had wanted me to bring tomatoes anyway, and they said didn’t my mother know that tomatoes were fruit, and I said that she did but she wanted me to bring tomatoes anyway, and they asked why, and I said that she just did. The kids didn’t understand why my mother would want me to bring the

wrong thing to school knowing full well it was the wrong thing. And I explained the importance of not throwing away food, but they didn’t seem to care, and when I got to school the kids took tomatoes out of the shopping bag when I wasn’t looking and smashed them on the four-square court.

I went inside the main building with my tomatoes and said the pledge with the rest of the first grade, then I exited with my class to go to our portable building. The school was growing and had that year acquired two portable buildings, and my class was lucky enough to be in one of them, announcements brought to us on pink slips of paper by “special helpers.” I watched the kids from my class line up outside the portable building, waiting to be let in after our teachers had their morning chat. I was looking at the kids, looking for their vegetables. None of them had any—none that I could see anyway. Their moms probably sent them with a potato or two, packed snugly into the small pocket of their backpacks. I moved toward the back of the line and lingered on the side of the portable building so no one would

see my bag of tomatoes and ask me about them. When the line started moving, I took the last place, the most disgraceful of all, and solemnly entered the classroom.

When I got inside I went in back, to the cloakroom, a series of hooks made separate by a storage cabinet, and set my bag of tomatoes down next to my hook. I slipped my backpack off my shoulders and let my load fall to the ground, not caring if I smashed my cargo, almost hoping I would so that mother would find the messy tomato drippings stinking up the inside and feel bad

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for making me carry so many tomatoes. I put my yellow Cabbage Patch Kid lunchbox next to my backpack and then ran to Miss White’s desk to tell her that my mother had sent plenty of vegetables for the project. Then, thinking that maybe Miss White might get the impression that I hadn’t learned anything in our vegetable lesson, I added that I had brought a zucchini, emphasizing the *I*, though not too much, as I suddenly realized that for all I knew zucchini

could’ve been a fruit too. Miss White just nodded and said we’d get to that later.

That afternoon, project time finally came. It turned out that we were supposed to cut the vegetables with plastic knives to make stamps, which we dipped in poster paint and used to stamp on construction paper. Vegetables that worked well for this were brought by my classmates: potatoes, carrots, turnips, and a head of cabbage, which was cut in half to make stamps of brains.

I set the tomatoes aside, in view to show I had brought something, out of the way to show that I knew it was wrong, while I stamped some pretty blue zucchini sand dollars on my paper. While I waited for Miss White to walk by and praise me, Ashley Simpkins and all the girls with the Hello Kitty school supplies informed me

that tomatoes were a fruit. They had tattled on me several weeks earlier for making my eights as two circles and not drawing the “hat” on my fives last. They asked me hadn’t I learned in our lessons that tomatoes were fruit? I said that I had, and that it was my mother who had sent the fruit. They asked me if my mother knew the difference between fruits and vegetables. Trying to avoid the situation I’d faced on the hill that morning I said no, she didn’t know the difference. Ashley Simpkins turned to me, flipping her wispy blond hair, took the tip of her plastic pencil out of her mouth, and asked me, “Is your mother stupid?” And I told her yes, yes she was. And Miss White overheard me and came over and asked me why I would say such a thing, why would I say that my own mother was stupid. I told her it was because she didn’t know the difference between fruits and vegetables. ○



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