

## 80. Tomato on Board

WHAT YOU DON'T know until you carry a tomato seedling through the airport and onto a plane is that carrying a tomato seedling through the airport and onto a plane will make people smile at you almost like you're carrying a baby. A quiet baby. I did not know this until today, carrying my little tomato, about three or four inches high in its four-inch plastic starter pot, which my friend Michael gave to me, smirking about how I was going to get it home. Something about this, at first, felt naughty—not comparing a tomato to a baby, but carrying the tomato onto the plane—and so I slid the thing into my bag while going through security, which made them pull the bag for inspection. When the security guy saw it was a tomato he smiled and said, “I don't know how to check that. Have a good day.” But I quickly

realized that one of its stems (which I almost wrote as “arms”) was broken from the jostling, and it only had four of them, so I decided I better just carry it out in the open. And the shower of love began.

It was a shower of love I also felt while carrying a bouquet of lilies through the streets of Rome last summer. People, maybe women especially, maybe women my age-ish and older especially, smiling with approval. A woman in a housedress beating out a rug on a balcony shouted *Bravo!* An older couple holding hands both smiled at me and pulled into each other, knitting their fingers together. My showerers might have been disappointed to know I was not giving the lilies to a sweetheart but to my friends Damiano and Moira, who had translated a few of my poems into Italian and were so kind as to let me stay at their place a few nights while I was passing through. On the way to the vegetarian restaurant Damiano’s ex-wife owns with her partner, we walked by what I’m pretty sure Damiano said was the biggest redbud tree in the world. It stretched for yards, lounging periodically onto the mossy earth, its beautiful black bark glistened by the streetlights. Though translation is an act of love, so my showerers needn’t be disappointed at all.

Before boarding the final leg of my flight, one of the workers said, “Nice tomato,” which I don’t think was

a come on. And the flight attendant asked about the tomato at least five times, not an exaggeration, every time calling it “my tomato”—*Where’s my tomato? How’s my tomato? You didn’t lose my tomato, did you?* She even directed me to an open seat in the exit row: *Why don’t you guys go sit there and stretch out?* I gathered my things and set the li’l guy in the window seat so she could look out. When I got my water I poured some into the li’l guy’s soil. When we got bumpy I put my hand on the li’l guy’s container, careful not to snap another arm off. And when we landed, and the pilot put the brakes on hard, my arm reflexively went across the seat, holding the li’l guy in place, the way my dad’s arm would when he had to brake hard in that car without seatbelts to speak of, in one of my very favorite gestures in the encyclopedia of human gestures.

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