

What My Sister Does Now

My sister pots tiny lettuce plants in her living room. Black soil spills across the wood floor, mixing in and among the pieces of toys and clean laundry. She is making a farm and a family in the fields of Augusta County, Virginia. They grow tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, broccoli, zucchini.

And when I arrive, her four-year old son, before he even says hello, thrusts a yellow watermelon into my hands. "We are eating this," he tells me. And we do, scooping the meat out with our fingers and licking the juices off our arms and out of the bends in our elbows.

Daniel, my brother-in-law, is a pragmatist. Right now he is overwhelmed with his delicate heirloom tomatoes. Though all the rage at farmer's markets and gourmet restaurants, he is not convinced that, to the average buyer, they vary that much from his far more straightforward Sungolds. "I'm giving Amanda a taste test," he says, doubting I will be able to tell the difference.

We have been bent over the vines all afternoon, picking them gently. These are the tomatoes I was thinking of last week in Los Angeles as I picked through a box of heirlooms at my local farmer's market. My father had been telling me about helping Ashley and Daniel plant them. He had never heard of an heirloom. Raised in dusty Arkansas in The Depression, my father considers food merely sustenance—a tomato is a tomato. But on the phone he was telling me how beautiful these were and how proud he is that people love what my sister has grown. And as I stood there, at that market, three thousand miles from my family, those California heirlooms, striped in old ways, made their way through the relentlessness of things.

Now I am holding the ones my father spoke of, but Daniel is convinced they aren't worth the time. These we pick are overripe. And there are hundreds more green ones. By the time they get to those, they too will be overripe. There are only the two of them to farm here, this first year. They can't afford to hire any more help. My sister is skinny. Tall and thin, she's still skinnier than I've ever seen her.

We load the crates into the truck, I close my eyes and hold out my hands to Daniel. He places chunks of all the different tomatoes he grows in them. I report my findings as the afternoon sits still for a moment. That one is a little sweet. That one has a tang. That one tastes like I expected. That one like fruit. That one acidic. He gives me the last two again. But I can still tell the difference. The acidic one is the Sungold. The fruity one is the heirloom Brandywine. It is delicious, like plums. Still trying to disprove me, he says, "Yeah but with a little salt and some olive oil and fresh mozzarella, it wouldn't matter."

But it would. It would matter. It matters that *tomato* doesn't mean one thing. It matters that I picked it, here in this field. It matters that each row is different from the next. It matters that someone knows how to grow each one of them.

Driving endless miles on the Los Angeles freeways, the radio keeps me company. Recently I heard filmmaker Jason Wise talk about making his documentary *Somm*, about people trying to pass the Master Sommelier Exam. He made the film because “so many people go through life and don’t truly love and care about something completely.” And on why the exam needs to be so difficult: “Think about it. I don’t need an expert in real estate or an accountant every week. But every week I buy a couple of bottles of wine and I want the person selling them to me to care about what he is talking about.”

Yes, I thought as I searched for a parking spot. My poet heart has always loved how vintners and sommeliers parse out the red into earth and smoke and cherry; the white into straw and lemon and honey, as if those things are really in that glass—distilled essences from great alchemy vats.

Just as at my favorite coffeehouse, there are six different roasts of espresso listed on the board. When I ask the barista about them, he offers the most sumptuous descriptions of what I drink every day that I think I know.

That matters. It matters that someone knows the details of what he spends his days doing. Not an economist or a military strategist or a conflict negotiator—just a guy who makes coffee. We used to be a world where everyone knew everything about what they did every day. Where we chose what to do with our lives because we were good at it and we had learned our trades working beside our fathers and mothers in the waning afternoons.

Now it seems we do what we do because we can make a living with the least amount of effort. Home Depot doesn’t know anything about me. Target doesn’t care about adjectives and the way flavors dance. At Starbucks, a button makes the coffee.

But it matters that someone still knows how to run the espresso for exactly the right amount of time. It matters that the guy selling me wine can also tell me a story. It feels as if stories should always be tucked into our days, in the places we are not expecting them. It feels as if we should always want to place what we grow into someone’s hands, stretched out in August sunlight.