

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Dixon Wingrove
Bad Tomatoes

I was in the back garden picking tomatoes for lunch. The sun was hot and the air shimmered. I pushed the visor further up my forehead to wipe the sweat from my eyes and there he was. I never even heard him walk up. He was just there in the empty lot next door, holding the top of the fence, watching me.

"Oh," I said.

He nodded and said, "Nice tomatoes there, lady." He was close enough I could see the stains on his teeth. "Must be a pretty good year."

We did have a lot of tomatoes; it had been a pretty good year.

"Well," I said, "it hasn't been too bad." I looked around the garden. "If you'll excuse me." I picked up the basket and turned to go.

"What's the rush? Your husband in there waiting for you?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

"He's making lunch."

"Come on, lady. On a Tuesday? I bet your husband isn't even home. He's probably off at work."

"What do you want?" I said. The sweat rolled from my hair and down my face and back.

"I don't want a thing. But since you're offering, I'll take one of those. My mother never was any good at growing tomatoes."

The coat he wore despite the heat was torn and poorly patched. "Why don't you go back home?" I said.

"Just give me a tomato and I'll go. I'm just a little hungry is all." He grinned a grin I couldn't make sense of.

I looked at the heirlooms clustered in the basket. "I've got to go inside," I said.

"That's not very hospitable of you. I've always heard about Southern hospitality, but I've sure never seen it." He leaned his arms against the fence, easy, his hands hanging into the yard. "I mean, I can understand you not wanting me in your house." He sniffed his shoulder. "But to not even offer me something from your garden, when you've got so much." He let his head hang loose and wagged it back and forth.

I blinked the sweat from my eyes and saw then the glint of knife at his waist, naked and tucked in a belt loop, half hidden by his coat. A screen door slapped someplace down the street. He must have seen me looking because he pulled it out and ran the blade across his palm and laughed.

"This thing," he said, "you don't need to worry about this thing. It's just for tomatoes."

From inside came the peals of Mable's crying, breaking between the man and me. We both stood there and listened. She'd been so good.

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"Who's that?" he said.

"No one."

He smiled again. "You're lying," he said. He put one of his feet in the links of the fence.

I searched the ground for something, anything, but there wasn't even a trowel. "Stop," I said, but he was already in the yard, and so I ran, and the tomatoes all spilled from the basket.