My grandmother Sadie Blanche died when she was ninety-six. The last twenty-two years of her life, her tomatoes kept her alive.

It’s a common enough story—when she lost her husband, she lost her interests. She stopped playing poker and setting her hair and fishing in the river, and some days she didn’t get out of bed until it was almost time to get back in. Then, about three years after my grandfather died, her eldest daughter (my aunt Bess) gave her four ice cube trays for her seventy-fourth birthday.

For the next twenty-two years Grandmother planted tomato seeds in those ice cube trays. Aunt Bess didn’t know Grandmother was going to use them to start tomatoes in; she gave them to her because Grandmother had taken to complaining that she didn’t have enough ice cubes for iced tea and lemonade, and Aunt Bess thought they would stop her complaints.

“Not having ice cubes worries on you so, ma,” Aunt Bess said. “Now you’ll never be low on ‘em again.”

But instead of freezing water in them, Grandmother pounded twelve holes in each tray (one hole for each cube) with a center punch she found in my grandfather’s tool box, filled them with equal parts of dirt from the flower beds by the driveway and peat moss and builder’s sand, opened a three-year-old packet of seeds that a neighbor boy sent from Naples during the war, and planted the first of what would become known around my hometown in Illinois as “Sadie’s Tomatoes.”

I don’t know how they grow tomatoes commercially, but Grandmother rediscovered the pleasure of taking pains with hers. She sterilized the dirt, for example, that she mixed with peat moss and builder’s sand to plant the seeds in. First she sifted it through her kitchen strainer so it’d be an even texture. Then she spread it out in her old jelly roll pans, dampened it a bit, and put the pans in her warming oven, which she kept hovering around two hundred degrees. I can’t remember how long she left them there—I seem to remember they stayed there all day long. Only then would she allow that dirt to help nurse the seeds.

And it sounds so simple to just get some “dirt from the flower beds by the driveway.” But that dirt cost years of labor. Every fall for as long as anyone could remember, my grandfather had taken three barrels—one almost full of feathers that Grandmother plucked from chickens during the year, one full of oak ashes from his and his neighbors’ fireplaces, and one full of shredded maple and elm leaves from the backyard—and spread the contents over the remaining flowers in the flower beds. Then he spaded the whole works into the soil.

The job took him all week. Truth to tell, it wasn’t that big a job, but my grandfather only worked early in the mornings, and he rested four times as long as he spaded. The flower beds stretched about four feet wide and ran along both sides of the driveway all the way from the house to the sidewalk, about sixty or seventy feet.

I doubt that my grandmother knew at the time what a fine combination of nutrients her husband put into those beds every fall. The feathers built plant protein and gave the plants the nitrogen they had to have to grow strong and turn

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Sadie’s Tomatoes
green. The ashes gave them potassium—nature’s vitamin tablet, disease fighter, and sugar/starch developer—and phosphorus—something tomato plants need lots of if they’re going to have healthy roots and set good fruit. And the leaves, moldy and heavy after a winter of decomposing in the barrel, seethed with trace elements and microorganisms that helped turn the driveway soil into a rich, friable loam.

But if Grandmother didn’t know at that time about soil, she knew about results. So after that first year when the tomato plants she started from those seeds shot up into the sky like corn stalks, and some of the branches broke from having too many fat tomatoes hanging from them, and all her neighbors raved about how they never tasted tomatoes like that, and even after giving most of them away, she still had enough left to put up twenty-six quarts—why, that next year she started plucking chickens in buckets of hot water again for her neighbor Jim just so she could save the feathers, and she saved the oak ashes from the fireplace and asked Jim and a couple of other neighbors to save their ashes too, and she raked up all the leaves in the backyard and shedded them with the lawn mower and saved them too; and so when the next fall rolled around, she and Jim edge-rolled those three barrels out to the flower beds and she spaded all that she saved into the soil just as her husband did. The only difference was, she got the job done in two days instead of five or six.

Once she started planting tomatoes in those beds, they never knew flowers again, and nobody called them the “flower beds” anymore either. In just one year those beds went from plural to singular and became the “tomato patch.” That’s because everybody who tasted one of Grandmother’s tomatoes realized at once that something special had happened, that just as nature and nurture and opportunity sometimes coincide and produce a genius like Shakespeare or Bach, so seeds and soil and rain and temperature and sunlight and air and Grandmother’s pains got together and produced a genius tomato.

For make no mistake, her tomatoes were genius. Plump, and way too heavy for their size. More meaty than juicy, but still you couldn’t eat one the way you eat an apple without having juice run down your chin and onto your wrist and sometimes all the way to the crook of your elbow. Sweet as melons. Redder than cherries. Plum shaped, but as fat and as big as those hybrid beefsteaks you see nowadays in fancy markets. A skin so thin you could cut them with a table knife. And flavorful—oh my sweet Jesus. You’d take an eighth of one, sprinkle a little salt and pepper on it, pop it in your mouth and bite down, and all at once your whole mouth filled up with juice and pulp that tasted so sweet and fresh and earthy and tomatoey it almost made you weep, it was that good.

And then you’d start chewing. And it got even better.

That first year, one of the folks Grandmother gave some of her tomatoes to was a neighbor three houses down from her—Henry Caroselli. Henry owned Caroselli’s, a restaurant his father started in the twenties in the old part of town. Henry liked Grandmother’s tomatoes so much he bought some from her and featured her tomato sandwich on his menu. Here was the recipe she gave him to follow:

Two slices of sourdough bread, first-day fresh.
Spread both pieces with a thin layer of mayonnaise.
Cut the tomato thick and lay the slices on gentle. Do not overlap any.
Sprinkle with a little salt and pepper.
Top with real thin slices of red onion.
Wait a bit for some of the juices to soak down into the bottom piece of bread.
Cut in half with a real sharp knife so you don’t squash anything.
Take the first bite out of the middle where no crust is.
Serve with ice cold milk, nothing else.

Henry printed up copies of her recipe and served one with every order. By the end of the summer, it was the most popular sandwich on his menu. And the next year, when her second crop came in, he took out an ad in the Daily Journal announcing that “SADIE’S TOMATO SANDWICHES ARE ONCE AGAIN AVAILABLE AT CAROSELLI’S.” And he took out the same ad every year that Grandmother had a crop. Word was, after a couple of years some folks drove a hundred miles just to have one of Grandmother’s tomato sandwiches.

But I got ahead of myself a bit, for I was talking about how Grandmother took pains, and I wanted to tell you more about what she did with her seeds and all.

You never know about seeds. Especially seeds mailed from Italy three years ago, even if they aren’t from hybrids. So before Grandmother planted any of them in her ice cube trays, she sprinkled a dozen of them onto a couple of wet newspapers, clamped a glass bowl on top, and set them on top of the stove. After a week or so, ten out of the twelve had split open and germinated, so she knew that nearly all of the seeds in that packet were good.

Of course after that first year, Grandmother didn’t have to test her seeds like that. She knew they were good because every year she saved the seeds herself. First she took some of the ripest, fattest tomatoes from the strongest, healthiest plants, mashed them in a big glass bowl, and covered them with lukewarm water. She stirred the mixture every day until it started to ferment, and the good seeds settled to the bottom. Then she scooped off the pulp and the floating...
seeds. The liquid that was left, she drained through her kitchen strainer, catching the good seeds. Next she spread the good seeds on triple layers of newspaper and put them on top of the stove to dry. A few days later she sealed them up tight in a canning jar, labeled them, and set them on the rack in the basement right next to her canned tomatoes.

Early in March she planted her seeds. She planted two or three in each cube of the trays because she wanted to make sure that when those leaves started to poke up through the dirt she’d have at least one good strong seedling in every cube. She sprinkled water on the trays three times a day, set them on the window sill of her bathroom while the sun poured in on them, and moved them over to the top of the hall radiator during the night.

In a week or so the first seedlings showed, pushing aside the dirt, searching for the sun. When that happened Grandmother started watering the trays from the bottom up instead of from the top down. Every day—sometimes twice a day, depending—she put the trays in her old jelly roll pans and filled them with water and let the trays sit there for a couple of hours. And every week she gave them a drink of chicken tea—chicken manure that she got from Jim, mixed with water. Grandmother waited for the second set of leaves to appear before she transplanted the seedlings into six-inch clay pots. That’s when she culled them too, throwing away the scrawny ones until she had about forty or so good-looking plants, one to a pot.

So now, instead of four ice cube trays, she had forty clay pots to keep warm and sunny and moist and fed. And she did. For three weeks or so she moved those pots around during the day, rotating them from one window sill to another all over the house. And at night, after she damped the furnace, she moved them into her bedroom where she plugged in a little heater to cut the chill. She watered the pots from the bottom up too, just as she did with the trays, and every few days gave them a drink of chicken tea.

Then she started hardening them off—gradually adjusting them to the windier, sunnier, hotter, colder, dryer life they would find outside. It took her two more weeks. Every day she took the forty or so pots outside and put them on the front porch. The first day she barely set them down before she brought them back in. The second day she let them stay out a bit longer; the third day, a bit longer still; and so on, until by the end of the second week they stayed outside all day and all night. Then she culled them again, keeping only the sturdiest thirty-two plants.

Finally, early in May, when no frost had shown up for weeks, and the storm windows were down and put away in the basement, and the mornings smelled of lilacs, and the evening breeze flowing soft along the river made your heart ache, Grandmother planted her tomatoes in her tomato patch.

Early in the morning she dug sixteen holes, four or so feet apart, a foot or so deep, on both sides of the driveway. She put a good shovelful of some ground-up corncobs that she got from the feed store into each hole, covered them with a mixture of chicken manure and dirt, filled the holes with quadruple-strength chicken tea, and let it settle. Grandmother eased the plants out of their pots and placed them so that the bottom leaves set just below the soil line. After she filled the holes with a mixture of dirt and peat moss, she gave the plants another drink of quadruple-strength chicken tea.

All the while she talked to them. “There, there, dear little fella. Don’t you be afraid now. Momma’s going to make sure you’ll be ok. Here. Let’s tuck you in now for the night.” With that, she covered each one with a peach basket. She tucked them in like that every night for a couple of weeks.

The next morning she formed ten-inch circles out of strips of roofing tin and placed them around the plants to ward off cutworms; and sowed opal basil seeds along the sides of the tomato patch to discourage tomato hornworms; and put a saucer of beer next to each plant to snare snails. For this was back in the days when folks still tended victory gardens, back before DDT and other insecticides forever changed the way we grew things. Back then tomato growers like Grandmother fought insects and bugs and diseases with guile instead of with chemicals. Every morning she checked every plant for signs of trouble. When the tomatoes started to form, she dusted the plants with a mixture of wood ashes and sulfur to prevent fungus, to discourage mealy bugs and ants, and to shoo away any tomato hornworms that fought through the opal basil. And of course later on in the summer, she kept the plants mulched with a two- or three-inch layer of grass clippings to help keep the soil evenly moist and to protect the plants from soil-borne disease.

A man at the feed store showed Grandmother how to stake her tomatoes. He cut her off thirty-two pieces of hog fencing—each about seven feet long by five feet high—and formed them into columns about three feet in diameter. Those columns were her stakes. At first, the plants looked small and lonely sitting inside there, but as they grew, they supported themselves by sticking their branches out through the holes in the fencing; and before the tomatoes ripened, the plants stood taller and bigger around than the columns. When the tomatoes did ripen, the five-inch-wide holes in the fencing gave Grandmother plenty of room to reach in and pick them.

She watered by feel and intuition, not by design or schedule. The wind, the rain, the clouds, the sun, the temperature,
the humidity, the soil, the age of the plants and how they looked—all affected when and how much she watered. The only constant was how she watered, for she never sprayed her tomato plants from the top but always drenched the soil around them. And right up until just before the tomatoes started to change color, every couple of weeks she gave them a good long drink of chicken tea.

Every fifth year, Grandmother let her tomato patch lay fallow. But not her mind. For her interest in tomatoes sustained her, and she spent much of those off-springs and summers in the university library reading about bugs and soil and fertilizers and anything else that pertained to her plants. And every year she made some changes in the way she did things. And every year, it seemed, her tomatoes got even fatter and meatier and juicer and more tomatoey.

I’d love to tell you something poetic about the way it all ended—that one year none of the plants set any fruit and so Grandmother just took up and died, or that Grandmother died in the summer and none of her tomatoes ripened from that point on, or that she took a bite of one and choked on it—but nothing like that happened.

One Palm Sunday morning Grandmother never woke up, is all. They found her in her bedroom with forty-one tomato plants in six-inch clay pots sitting around on the chairs and the nightstands and the dresser and the little wicker desk and the cedar chest, and with the plug-in heater turned on high.

Nobody knew what to do with the plants, so I guess someone set them outside in the backyard, or maybe in the alley.

And later on that summer a young couple from Vermont bought her place.

And the following year, early in May, when no frost had shown up for weeks, and the storm windows were down and put away in the basement, and the mornings smelled of lilacs, and the evening breeze flowing soft along the river made your heart ache, they planted cosmos and impatiens and Martha Washington geraniums in Grandmother’s tomato patch.