

TOMATO OF GRATITUDE

My college friend Tim Korzun would have been 66 years old this week. He died last March from the coronavirus. These days I wonder: Do you still have a birthday when you die? My sister's birthday was also this week. She would have been 72. (I still have her faded Social Security card on my desk.) She died twenty years ago. I visited her grave yesterday in the Jewish cemetery on Gill Lane in Iselin. Her grave sits next to the graves of my father, mother, and grandparents. ("The whole *mishbucha*," my father's voice speaks in my ear.) An overgrown azalea half-covered her name, and as I cut back the shrubbery a brown rabbit shot out from the undergrowth. I wanted to believe it was her spirit. And I suddenly remember one of her many sayings: "Aspirin only works when you're wearing pajamas." I smile as I imagine that saying printed on an aspirin bottle, and I leave a pebble and a single red rose from my garden on her gravestone. I drive away listening to Frank Loesser singing and playing "I'll Know." The air is heavy with humidity and mystery. I feel I should take an aspirin, but I'm already dressed.

I'd gone to the grave to get out of the house, and to celebrate finishing a draft of a novella I'd been working on for many months — called *Playland* after the Times Square arcade. It seems I've been trying to get this story right for the last 40 years — trying to exorcise a first love. Why this still feels so urgent remains another mystery. The older I become the more I realize how many mysteries — both profound and mundane — surround us. On the mundane side: Why does the traffic on the Garden State Parkway slow to a crawl near Exit 144 — alongside that over-populated city of gravestones on both sides of the road? On the southbound lane, apparently directly in the graveyard, there's a convenience store. Every time I notice it, I imagine, in the middle of burying a loved one, some mourner saying: "Hold on a minute! I gotta get some Cheez-Doodles."

Outside I find a single cherry tomato on display on the stone wall of my back garden. It is a ripe tomato, harvested from my own plant a few feet away — and it is intact except for one tiny tooth-mark. This has been happening everyday for a week. I finally have an idea who is leaving me this singular gift. At about ten each morning, a chipmunk appears on the wall, and he sits there—staring at the back door—offering up a loud, repeating *eeep!* I go outside with a handful of sunflower seeds, and my chipmunk doesn't move as I place the seed on the wall beside him. "Good boy," I say, hoping he's bilingual. I withdraw back into the porch and watch him stuff his cheeks with seed before two cardinals swoop down to join him.

Then he's gone, and by morning, in the same spot where I placed the seed, sits one ripe cherry tomato. It strikes me that he's giving me a gift in return for his meal. If such a thing can be, it's his thank you....

Of course, we're probably too quick in this household to personify animals. Lynn insists it's her father's spirit visiting her whenever she sees a monarch butterfly — and she believes the chipmunk may be an orphan who is bonding with me as a father figure. Obviously we've been sheltering in place too long.

In any case, happy birthday, Tim. I add my tiny measure of grief and love to all of us who have stood face to face with the mysteries of chipmunks and mortality.