

1963

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Aunt Cil said she didn't like the taste of food, and I wondered at that my whole life. Everything tasted bad to her except tomatoes.

I worked teenaged summers in her industrial clinic, where washed up alcoholic doctors tended to the garment workers of LA. My aunt would triage

the frightened, mangled ones with her comical Spanglish, speaking louder than necessary. She knew the words that would work.

Always the first name first, and Jorge or Maria would hang on through the bone-setting and stitching. She was a blond saint to them. To me, she was a mystery

sending me out for a lunch she didn't want, she would scarf it down just like you would fill a tank with gas. At home she cooked big meals for Tom and the boys

but still sat, short of liking them, too. But then came mid-summer and we drove home through the disappearing fields of Orange County and I could feel her anticipation

for when someone says she only likes
tomatoes, she doesn't mean sauce
or canned tomatoes, or tomato soup. She
only means really fresh tomatoes

and I wanted to be there on the day she
swerved off the road and parked near
the rickety stand and bought a flat of
heavy beefsteaks. She would grasp

the warmest one in her hand and bite
and I would bite, too, and a red world would
explode all over us, and we would suck
out the juice. She would look at me, and I

at her, and I wouldn't see a saint, but a sinner
like the rest of us, and it gave me some hope
about my future as a wife, what I could still
get away with if I ever settled down.