

I, TOMATO



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California Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Teachers/ AFL-CIO

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*This book is dedicated to the farm workers of America,
by whose hands we all are fed.*

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I, Tomato was written by Bill Morgan, with the help of the Labor in the Schools Committee of the California Federation of Teachers.
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For more information on the Labor in the Schools Committee, visit our web page: (www.cft.org.)

Have you ever thought about where your food comes from?

(Everybody knows that tomato plants can't really talk, but if they could, they might say something like this...)



Call me Tomato. I was born somewhere in southern California. My seed was planted in a seed bed, and my first weeks were spent in a nursery, where I could grow protected from the weather. They kept the place warm and gave us plenty of water and good food, and I first broke through the ground sometime in February. I don't remember the exact date.

In the hothouse, there were rows and rows of tomato plants just like me. Each day, men and women came by to water us, to feed us and to care for us. It is to these nursery workers, named Juana and Dolores and Rajib, that I owe my life. In those few weeks, I grew taller and stronger. I felt the water and the good food running up my stalk and out to my branches.

And then came The Day. I went to sleep as usual, but when I awoke, I was sitting, along with my many sisters, on the back of a pickup truck, and we were OUTSIDE!

The sun was very bright. I could hardly stand it. The truck was loud and the ride was bumpy. There were several hundred of us, arranged in boxes that were piled on top of one another. I lucked out because my box was on top, so I could see where we were going. It must have been terrible for those who were in the dark near the bottom. The men, who were named Finoy and Carlos, stopped the truck in a big field and then farmworkers came and got us. Our worker was named Connie.

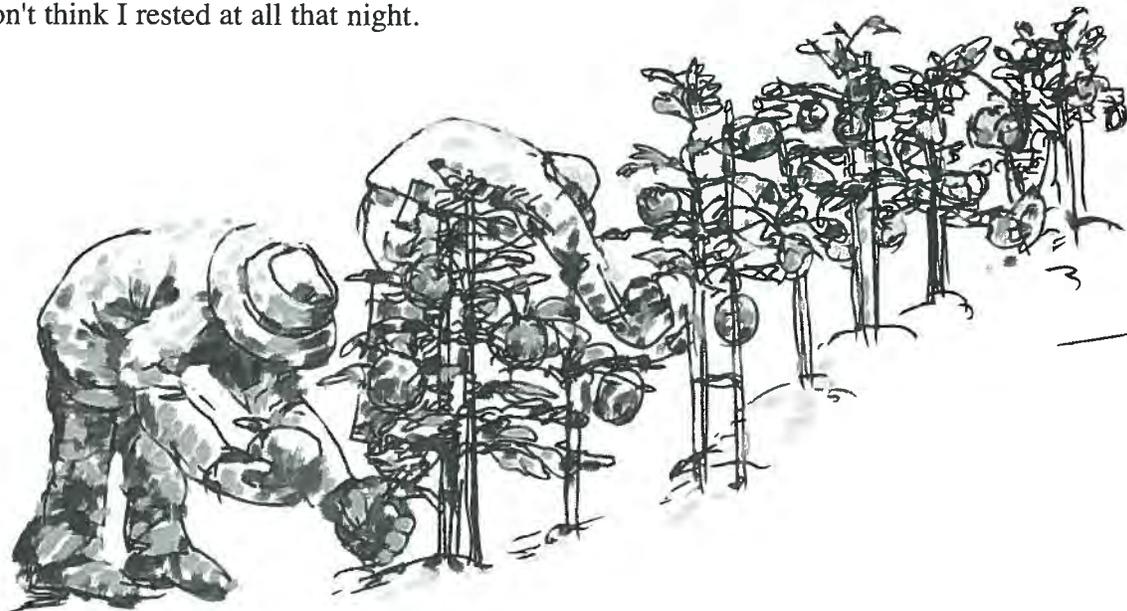
She was dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, a bandana, and a straw hat covered her head. She took us out of the box, one by one, made a hole in the dirt with a small shovel, and planted us. When it was my turn, I felt her warm hands as she carefully placed me in the ground.

But still, I felt really sick. My branches drooped, and I was sure I was going to fall down. I didn't think I could make it on the outside. But Connie had put my roots deep enough so I wouldn't fall over, and then piled dirt all around my feet. The dirt was thick and warm. Later, a little hose dripped water all around me. I was thirsty and took a long drink.

That night, two things happened. When it got dark, it got colder than I had ever felt before. I couldn't rest, no matter which way I turned. I missed my nursery.

It was a very bad night for all of us. We were all in a new place. The outside dirt tasted different from the nursery dirt. We were cold and homesick.

Later, I felt my first BREEZE. Air came by and hit me in the face. I couldn't believe it. The more I tried to lean back or turn my head, the more the breeze hit me in the face. I don't think I rested at all that night.





The next day I was sick, and I stayed sick for a day or two. In those early bad times, the thing that got me through was "plantstory." Right, plantstory. I had heard some guy in the nursery telling a bunch of kids the story of the tomato. Now, I remembered the story, and it made me strong.

"Tomatoes don't give up," I remembered him saying. "We are a strong, proud plant. Over twelve hundred years ago, tomatoes were growing and feeding the Aztec and Mayan people in America. Europeans took tomatoes back to Spain with them during the 1500s, that time called the 'Conquista.' Some people thought tomatoes were poisonous and they were afraid of us. To others we were welcomed with open arms."

Thinking about all this stuff made me feel better, and it kept me from just sitting there and worrying. If all those tomatoes had made it, so could I!

By about the fourth day, I woke up feeling a lot better. The little hose kept dripping water, so there was always enough to drink. Even though I didn't like the plant food much, it was giving me energy and I spread out and began to grow again.

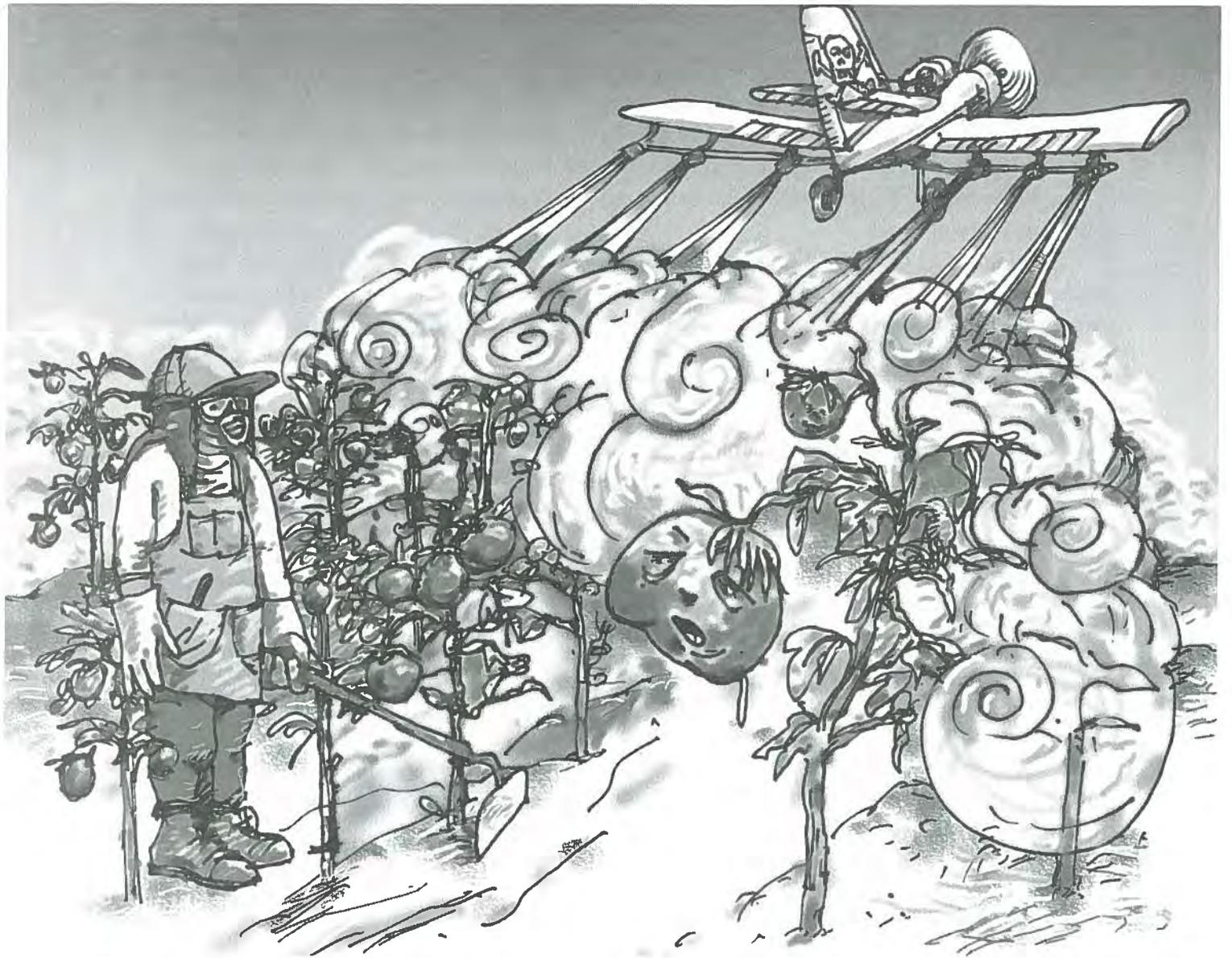
Each day, another woman, named Lupe, would come by, take away weeds growing near me, and make sure that I was O.K. It was very dusty out there, so Lupe wore a bandana and gloves. It was hot then, but not as hot as it would be later. Those were my early days.

Now a man named Marcos came by sometimes, checking the hose. Lupe came by sometimes, too. But most of the time it was just us, rows and rows of tomatoes, growing in the sun.

After awhile that summer, all of us were heavy with branches until Lupe came and tied us to the sticks so we could stand up and not fall all over the ground. It must have been a couple of months later when I started to get the first buds on my branches. I could feel the life pouring through me from the earth. There was so much life in me that it popped out on my branches, making buds like little yellow flowers.

This was fun because the bees started visiting me, drinking the juice in the flowers. They got flower dust stuck to their legs and carried it around, from one plant to another, from the male plants to the female plants, like me. This dust made the tomatoes come. At first, they were small and green, like little peas.

I have to tell you some of the bad stuff, too. Bugs! These little white things came by one day and started to attack me. They started eating my branches and taking water out of me. Marcos came by with this spray and shot me right in the face with this horrible dust. It stuck on me and made me sick.



The bugs were gone, though, and didn't come back. But I heard about some places where they dump the poison cloud out of a flying machine, every week or something, on us and the people who are working. It kills the bugs all right, but it poisons everything else, like the people and the water and the land. I was lucky. I turned out to be a kind of tomato plant the bugs don't like the taste of.

By the summer, big red tomatoes were hanging on my branches, so heavy that I couldn't hold them up. I put them down on the ground, or let them hang on me while I held onto the stick that was stuck deep in the ground. And the same thing was happening to all of us. This field was filled with rows of growing things.

Then people came by to pull the tomatoes off me, and it felt good because I didn't have to hold them anymore. The farmworkers put them in pails, and I watched other workers come over with empty pails and take the full ones away. In the middle of our part of the field, there was a big table and people were putting all our tomatoes into wooden boxes and piling them on trucks. There was a big bin off to one side where they threw all the sick ones. I hoped none of my tomatoes were in there.

The boxes were loaded into a truck, and by nighttime the truck was full. A driver with a big moustache named José Manuel drove off with them. All through the night, we could hear the trucks and watch their lights as they passed by on the highway near our field. I don't know where they go, but I guess you do. I have asked one of my tomatoes to let me know.

I have thought a lot about all this lately, and I think I have figured it out. It's about life. Farmworkers made me strong and healthy, so life could come up out of the ground through me. I changed that life to tomatoes. The tomatoes go somewhere and people like you eat them, but the tomatoes don't die. After you wash them and eat them, they go inside you and make you strong and healthy, too. If you eat lots of tomatoes and other good food, your body will grow healthy. The life from the earth that came through me will live in you.

I want to thank the farmworkers who helped me in my career: Juana, Dolores and Rajib; Finoy and Carlos, Connie, Lupe, Marcos and José Manuel, who took my tomatoes to you. It is to them I owe my life and you owe your tomatoes.



A Letter

*(No, tomatoes can't write either. But think if they could!
This tomato wrote to her mother, the tomato plant.)*



Dear Mom:

The last time I saw you, you were standing in your row, waving your branches in the evening breeze. It was hard to watch you there as the truck pulled away, but like you told me, it was time for me to get on with my life. And I was lucky-- I was on the outside, pressed up against a space in the wooden crate, so I could see a lot of what was going on. The rest of the stuff I found out from my cousins.

Well, as you know, we were piled up in our boxes and strapped down on the back of a flatbed truck. After the bumpy road out of the field, our Driver (whom, I heard, is named José Manuel) turned onto the boulevard that leads out to the highway. All that evening, under the last of the sun, then the stars, and then the moon, we traveled toward the north.

José stopped once, to fill his truck with gas and get his dinner, but then we were off again. I realized that we were not alone. All around our truck, there were other trucks filled with vegetables and fruits heading north. The truck shook slightly, and the low rumble of the motor was very calming, as were the stars over us, and without realizing it, I fell asleep. How many hours passed? I have no idea.

I can't remember what woke me, Mom, but I think it was the city lights. I have never seen so many bright lights, except for the sun! On every street, there were lights. I am used to the nights in the quiet fields, so the bright lights and the noise from all the cars were annoying.

When our truck stopped, we were in a large outdoor market. People were moving around like shadows. José Manuel took off the straps that held us down and watched while others took our boxes down, one by one, and piled us up on the sidewalk near a big garage.



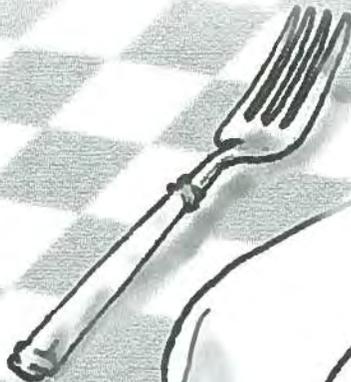
It was a little cold. I saw many of my cousins, piled up in boxes just like me, and after more waiting, people started to come up to the garage in trucks, smaller trucks than the one I had come in. They talked. They wrote on papers. They gave and took money. One of the people, a woman named Jo, took my box, and several others. She put us in the back of her small truck, and after awhile, she drove off with us.

I wasn't tired anymore, Mom. I lay in that box there, wondering where we were going. Would I be left to rot? Or would I continue my life in someone's body, helping that person to be strong? It wasn't night anymore. Off in the east, the sun was rising.

Jo took us to a store. We drove around back. Jo and a man and their son unloaded us onto the sidewalk in front of the store. (I know he was her son because she called him "Son.") It was Son who took the tops off our boxes and picked us up, one by one, and looked us over. A few were rotten and he threw them into a big can. Taking great care, he took us, one by one, from the box, and wiped us all over with this shiny stuff, then placed us carefully in rows in the display bin. Son put a sign with letters and numbers over us. Pretty soon, the sun came out, and I wasn't cold anymore.

And that is where I am now. It's later in the morning. The door to the store is open, and people are coming in. Some of them come over to the tomatoes and take us in their hands. They put us in a bag and then onto a moving sidewalk. A woman puts the bag on a white stand, reads some numbers, then types the numbers into another box. There is a noise and the box sticks out a drawer. Then the tomatoes are taken away to someone's home.

So, Mom, that's all I--Hey! Wait! They're putting me in a bag! I'm going to the moving sidewalk! Got to go, Mom!



Study Questions for *I, Tomato*

1. After the tomatoes are picked, the tomato plants die and are pulled up. But what does this tomato plant think about her life?
2. How many workers helped this tomato plant and her tomato, from the time she was planted to the time when her tomato was sold?
3. Where are your tomatoes grown? What other kinds of foods are grown in California?
4. Draw a comic strip showing every part of the tomato plant's life, from nursery to market.
5. This story is an autobiography— that is, it was written by someone telling about her own life. If you were to write your own autobiography, what would be in it?
6. What other food products come from tomatoes?
7. Words like "son" and "sun" sound the same but are spelled differently, and mean different things. What are these words called? Do you know more of them? Make a list.
8. Many farmworkers belong to a union. Do you know what a union is? If you were a worker, would you want to belong to a union? How can you find out if your fruits and vegetables were picked by union farmworkers?

