

## Tending Tomatoes

By April Dávila

It's after seven in the evening when the weather finally cools off enough to pry my kids from their screens and drag them outside to tend our tomato plants. Our Corona Garden. I hate it. Not the garden itself. I love watching things grow and teaching my kids about where food comes from, and the tomatoes we've harvested (all three of them) have been the most delicious things I've eaten all year, but I can't get comfortable in this world we're living in.

Between the smoke of California's fires and the blazing heat, we mostly keep indoors and like everyone else in the country, we're not having friends over. These are not the memories I had hoped to build with my kids.

I ache for potlucks, birthday celebrations, and game nights. I think back longingly on the parties my parents used to throw when I was kid in our old farmhouse in Sonoma County. I recall the sounds of laughter, the smells of basil and garlic. Most of all I remember the epic feasts we had on the days my dad went abalone diving.

On those days, my sister and I woke with my dad before dawn to pile into his VW van and drive up the coast to his favorite hunting spot. It was our job to lug the netted innertube down the rocky cliffside, bar and gauge clunking inside. We explored the tide pools while dad dove and when he dragged himself back up onto land he brought four fat abalone with him.

My sister and I would inspect the catch while dad told us about how his family had come to California from Oklahoma, chased off their land by the dust storms of the 1930s. They worked as migrant fruit pickers, and when there wasn't enough food for the family, they could wade out into the water and pluck abalone from the underside of the rocks. Right there, he would say, gesturing to the tidepools at our feet. No wetsuits, no snorkels.

Since then a catch limit had been instituted to protect the abalone and make sure they would survive for future generations, but not everyone obeyed the rules. Every year dad had to go further out, dive deeper to find our four abalone.

Back home, friends and family would already be gathering. Dad cleaned his catch and sliced the meat into steaks that my sister and I pounded with mallets. Mom cooked them up using dad's old family recipe. I've never tasted anything like it. The meat was buttery somehow, though there was no butter in the recipe, and it was so tender it fell apart in your mouth.

Our abalone dinners were more carefree than Christmas and more delicious than the fourth of July, but in recent months, I've come to see them in a new light. I've started to think

about the part of the story that my dad always glossed over, that part about how his family ate abalone because they had nothing else.

I never met my dad's mother, but it doesn't take much imagination to see those meals through her eyes. They ate sea snails to keep from starving. I picture wrinkled noses and forced swallows. If there was any celebration, it was only for going to bed with food in their bellies. What would my grandmother say if she could see her granddaughter cherishing abalone dinners as a family tradition? I like to imagine she would laugh.

Dad doesn't dive anymore, but even if he did, we wouldn't be eating abalone. The season was cancelled in 2018. Warmer oceans and struggling ecosystems have hit the abalone population hard. It's just one of so many traditions that have fallen away. We don't even see my dad these days as he moved to Idaho and air travel is fraught.

My world has shrunk to my home, my little tomato garden, and the few minutes I spend out there with my kids every evening. It makes me sad sometimes. But then I think of my grandmother and I wonder what my grandkids will hold dear from these times.

Maybe it will be the tomatoes. Maybe not. It's hard to imagine my children's children gleefully spritzing their hands with rubbing alcohol or looking forward to a zoom call, but hey, my grandmother ate sea snails. Humans are nothing if not adaptable. Even in the toughest of times, rife with political division, environmental disaster, and disease, we find ways to build meaningful traditions.

And so we tend the tomatoes.