

THE EXPLOSIVE TOMATO

I made an utter fool of myself this summer with an exploding tomato. I was attending a conference in Toronto. I knew no one there and, as it turned out, that was a very good thing. It was an environmental affair, and wouldn't you know it, the lunch was heavy on raw vegetables. I've never quite figured out why there is a connection between a concern with our environment and a commitment to raw vegetables, but I've learned to live with it.

Anyway, at lunch we were sitting at round tables that seated eight, and had been encouraged by the moderator to "network." If there is anything that will tempt me *not* to converse with my neighbour it is when I am told to do so. I feel equally reticent when, on New Year's Eve, midnight bongs and you have to hug and kiss people that you hardly know. It's OK if they are shapely, lissome females who do not have a cold, but in my circle that rarely occurs. My breath reeks of beer, there's green shards of spinach dip hanging off my incisors, and my lips are bright orange from the cheezies, so I'm no bargain either. In church, too, we are often encouraged to turn to our neighbors and shake hands. I find it a little awkward, but at least we are not encouraged to hug each other.

Well, I wasn't doing a great job at networking, and inadvertently made certain I would be utterly unsuccessful. Sitting in a room listening to experts drone on about depressing subjects (Greenland is melting, the boreal forest is disappearing) tends to make one hungry. It's a feeling, I suppose of "get food before it disappears off the face of the earth." As a result of this, my plate was heavy with vegetables and an assortment of multi-colored dips. I thought I might choke down enough cucumbers, celery and zucchini to assuage my ravenous hunger if I dipped them in the sauce they provided. This strategy worked well enough, except for the brown dip which was ground up chick peas or something. I must tell all you hosts and hostesses that a vegetable does not taste better if dipped in some other vegetable.

There I was, disguising my shyness with avid mastication, when it happened. I dipped a big cherry tomato, one about the size of a ping pong ball, in some white dip with green speckles in it, and bit into it. My mistake was in not inserting the entire tomato in my mouth before biting. But, with my little finger extended, I coyly bit the tomato in half. After a small amount of token resistance, the tomato gave up its entire mushy contents and violently expelled them onto the side of the face of a poor woman who was seated beside me.

When something like this happens, our reaction is almost sure to be wrong. The right thing would have been to bolt from the room, get in my car, and drive home to

Milford. "Well rid of that fool," they would have said, and settled back down. But I didn't do the wise thing. The poor woman reared back in her chair as if she had been kicked by a donkey, and I leapt from my seat and began pawing at her face with a napkin. This frightened her, a stranger pawing suddenly at her face. I also realized that the tomato pulp had not confined itself to splattering her head, but her upper clothing had also been defaced. Fortunately, I did not make mad swipes at her body which might well have resulted in calls to the police and ultimate incarceration for

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