STORY 1

The Victory Garden Tomato Contest

Elm Avenue, summer 1943

Gus Abernathy and Miss Iris Peabody had lived next door to each other on Elm Avenue for twenty-two years, and in all that time they had agreed on exactly one thing: the other one was wrong about tomatoes.

Gus had worked forty years on the railroad. He believed in order, and in Rutgers tomatoes, which grew round and red and reliable, the way a tomato ought to.

Miss Peabody had taught the fourth grade for thirty-five years. She believed in patience, and in a big, lumpy tomato called the Mortgage Lifter. A man in West Virginia had bred it and sold the plants for a dollar apiece until he paid off his house, and Miss Peabody said it tasted the way summer ought to.

In the spring of 1943, with so many young

men away at the war, the posters went up all over town: Plant a Victory Garden. Every family was asked to grow its own vegetables, so the farms could feed the soldiers. Gus dug up his whole backyard. So did Miss Peabody. And when the church announced a Victory Garden Show for the end of August, with a blue ribbon for the finest tomato in town, the whole street knew there would be trouble.

All summer long, the two of them worked their gardens on opposite sides of the same picket fence.

Gus watered at six in the morning, by his pocket watch. Miss Peabody watered at dusk, because she said tomatoes liked to drink in the cool of the evening. Gus tied his vines to straight wooden stakes. Miss Peabody grew hers in round wire cages and talked to them while she worked.

“You know they can’t hear you, Iris,” Gus said over the fence one morning.

“They can hear me just fine,” said Miss

Peabody. “They simply don’t care for your tone.”

By the middle of August, both gardens were bursting. Gus had a row of perfect red Rutgers, every one as round as a baseball. But Miss Peabody had something else. On the biggest vine in her garden, deep in the leaves, hung a single Mortgage Lifter the size of a softball, and it was growing bigger every day.

Gus saw it through the fence and said nothing. But he went inside and checked the almanac twice.

Three days before the show, Miss Peabody took the train to visit her sister in the next county. “Only overnight,” she told Gus. “And don’t you go near my tomatoes.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Gus.

That afternoon, the sky over Elm Avenue turned a strange greenish color. The wind picked up and flipped the leaves on the maple trees upside down. Gus had worked outside his whole life, and he knew what

that sky meant.

Hail.

He ran to his own garden first. Then he stopped, and he looked over the fence at Miss Peabody's tomatoes, and the giant Mortgage Lifter hanging there with nobody to protect it.

Gus Abernathy stood in his yard for perhaps three seconds. Then he went inside, pulled every bedsheet out of his linen closet, and climbed over the fence.

He was still tying the last sheet over Miss Peabody's tomato cages when the first hailstones came down, white and hard as marbles, bouncing off the sidewalk and rattling on the porch roofs all up and down the street. Gus pulled his hat down over his ears and held the sheet in place with both hands until it was over.

It lasted ten minutes. When it stopped, Miss Peabody's garden was safe and sound under a patchwork of bedsheets.

Gus's own garden, on the other side of

the fence, was flattened.

The next afternoon, Miss Peabody came home from the train station and found her tomatoes wrapped up like Christmas presents. She found her neighbor's garden lying in ruins. And she found Gus himself on his back porch with a sore shoulder and a cup of coffee, pretending nothing had happened.

"Gus Abernathy," she said, standing at the bottom of his porch steps. "What did you do?"

"Nothing much," said Gus. "Somebody had to look after that tomato of yours. It would have been a shame. Even if it is the wrong kind."

Miss Peabody looked at him for a long moment. Then she went home without a word.

On the morning of the Victory Garden Show, the church hall was full. There were long tables of beans and squash and cucumbers, jars of pickles, and baskets of

sweet corn. At the end of the tomato table sat the giant Mortgage Lifter on a white china plate. It was the biggest tomato anybody in town had ever seen.

The judge from the county office lifted it, weighed it, and wrote something on his card. Then he looked at the entry tag and frowned.

"There seem to be two names on this tag," he said.

The whole hall leaned in to look. In Miss Peabody's careful schoolteacher handwriting, the tag said: Grown by Iris Peabody. Saved by Gus Abernathy.

"Well," said the judge, "I suppose the rules don't say a tomato can't have two owners." And he pinned the blue ribbon to the tablecloth.

Everybody clapped. Gus turned red right up to the tips of his ears.

That evening, Miss Peabody knocked on his kitchen door with a basket over her arm.

"The ladies are canning tomatoes at the

church tomorrow," she said, "for the families with men overseas. I have more tomatoes than I can carry. I thought you might help me. And I thought you might like some of these."

In the basket were a dozen young tomato plants in clay pots. Half of them were Rutgers. Half of them were Mortgage Lifters.

"For next year," she said. "Your garden will need starting over."

The next spring, there was a gate in the picket fence between their two yards.

Gus still watered at six in the morning, by his pocket watch, and Miss Peabody still watered at dusk. They still argued about stakes and cages and which tomato tasted more like summer. They argued about it for the next twenty years, usually on one porch or the other, over two cups of coffee.

Neither of them ever won.

Neither of them ever seemed to mind.

Remember When?

- Did your family grow a garden? What did you plant, and who did most of the work?
- Do you remember canning or putting up vegetables? What jars lined your shelves?
- Was there a neighbor you liked to argue with, just for the fun of it?

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