

An Ordinary Guy

by

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Characters

JEFF A forty-something man

Setting

The bathroom. A toilet and hamper. A window in the BG.

Time

Morning, the near future. Jeff is getting ready for work, but he has something he wants to do first, in secret.

An Ordinary Guy

JEFF is standing by the window. He peeks through the blinds, then turns to the audience.

JEFF: I'm your ordinary guy. Wife, two kids. House, two cars. I know there are problems in the world, but I try not to let them get me down. Live and let live, that's my motto. I'm not interested in politics. Never been on a protest march. Never signed a petition. I just keep my head down; get on with life.

He sits—fully clothed—on the toilet, pulling the laundry hamper into place in front of him.

JEFF: 'Course I know something's going on with the environment. I don't need Greenpeace to tell me. I mean, me and the girls go camping and it's hard not to notice things are different. A fine spring day. The boardwalk. Skunk cabbage erupting out of the mud. Shiny yellow marsh marigolds. Trees dripping with catkins. Perfect, except...it's quiet. At first I don't know what I'm listening for. Then I realize it's frogs. Bullfrogs. Spring peepers. I remember when frogs equaled spring. The noise was almost deafening, until you got too close. Then things'd go quiet for a while. Never had much luck seeing the adults, but every pond, every puddle, was full of tadpoles. Was. But not now. Then there were the birds. Some didn't come back from wherever it was they migrated to. Some died of viruses nobody'd ever heard of—you'd find their bodies under a tree, maybe, or floating along the shore. Some just seemed to disappear. Didn't affect me directly, though. Just meant no dawn chorus. Meant I could sleep in longer in the morning.

A car door slams. He jumps up and checks the window, then sits back down.

JEFF: Anyhow, as I was saying, it was clear things were changing, but not enough to affect me. Then bees started dying. Suddenly the Net was full of articles about "colony collapse disorder." I didn't pay much attention. There are a lot of farms in this area, but I'm not a farmer. Don't know anyone who is. Turns out, though, that farmers need bees to pollinate their crops, and what everyone thought was just a temporary problem, wasn't. Corn was O.K. Wheat. Everything else grew and flowered, but didn't set fruit the way it used to. Food started to get expensive. Ordinary food. Things like apples and almonds, blueberries and broccoli.

He takes a container from the hamper and puts it on the floor.

JEFF: Have to admit I've never liked fruit and veggies. Oh, I eat them, alright, my wife sees to that. But I don't really like them. Except for tomatoes. I didn't care, one way or the other about tomatoes, when we lived further south, and you could grow them practically all year round. But somehow, once I had a decent *insalata di caprese*—in a sports bar in Toronto, after a Jays game—I couldn't get enough of them. Don't have room to grow them—we have a pool—but that never used to matter. Friends would give them to us, and for a few weeks in late summer... heaven. For the rest of the year, it was canned. The ones that're picked green and shipped in...or the hydroponic ones...they weren't worth eating. Only vine-ripened ones have that special flavour. It's been a long time since I had one of those.

He takes a cutting board and knife out of the hamper and arranges them carefully.

JEFF: Before, if I found a bushel of tomatoes at the farmers' market for a good price, I'd gorge on them. Now I can't find them at all. Turns out, you see, that there's some kind of blight, that affects them and potatoes and makes them go all black and mushy. The same blight that caused the Irish famine. My neighbour explained it to me. The disease isn't caused by a virus or bacteria or mould, but by something called a protist. Pro-tist. What the hell's that? Anyway, it started in the north-east. Spread from field to field, farm to farm, country to country, continent to continent. It's mutated. Become resistant to all the sprays we've got.

Very carefully, he opens the container and looks in.

JEFF: Ever had a real craving for something? Like beer on a hot summer's day? Ever looked at something and wanted it so bad you could almost taste it?

Out rolls a tomato.

JEFF: I've been watching this little lady grow. We have a relationship, she and I. And now she's ready to give herself to me. A few days earlier, and I'd've had to fry her. Ever had fried green tomatoes? Very nice, but second best.

He caresses the tomato lovingly. He smells it, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply.

JEFF: What does a tomato smell like? It smells like...a tomato. It smells like...summer days in the back yard, barbequing burgers. It smells like pizza after the game.

What's your favourite way of eating tomatoes? In a salad? As soup or juice? In spaghetti or pizza? If you thought this was going to be the last tomato you ever ate, how would you eat it? With salt? Or without?

He takes out a salt shaker.

JEFF: Wonder what they're doing in Italy, without tomatoes. Maybe they've got synthetic ones, like we do. They're made out of...well, I don't know what they're made out of. They look perfect. They taste like...crap. But this (*pointing to what's on the table*) is the real thing. Where did I get it from, you ask? (*putting his finger to his lips*) Don't ask.

He poses the tomato artistically, using his cell phone to take pictures of it.

JEFF: Isn't it beautiful? Look at it. Look at it closely. The colour. Red melting into orange. Light green—no, lime green on the shoulders. The stem—dark green, holding on with—count them—one, two, three, four, five clasps. Clasps that look like the claws of a hawk.

He takes a paper napkin and tucks it in at his neck. He starts to cut the tomato, hesitates, then starts again. Finally he cuts it into pieces. He salts one.

JEFF: What does the inside of a tomato look like? Those little seeds—what colour are they? Yellow. Green.

He closes his eyes and takes a bite. He looks close to having an orgasm.

JEFF: Hints of hot August days.

A police siren. His eyes fly open. He peeks through the blind; the noise recedes; he settles back.

JEFF: I said people couldn't grow tomatoes any more because of the blight. That's not completely true. If you've got a greenhouse, you can try sealing it off. Can't use bumblebees any more—they're gone—but there's something called the Electric Bee—a kind of wand—that you can use to move pollen from one flower to the other. Obviously you can't do it by the acre— unless you pay Chinese wages— but, high demand, low supply—you can get a good price for whatever you can produce. Better than nothing, I suppose—and a lot better than the synthetic stuff—but if you closed your eyes, you might not guess you were eating a tomato.

He eats another piece, savouring it.

JEFF: There's a lot of research going on, to find a blight-resistant tomato for commercial use. My neighbour works at the Vineland Research Station. The guys there think they've finally come up with one. VRS 2890. The number tells you how many varieties they've discarded. All of them patented. There's a lot of money—

His cell phone rings. He looks at who it is.

JEFF: Speak of the devil...

He turns it off.

JEFF: I can see his back yard from my window. *(pointing)* This window. He's got a big vegetable garden. Rows and rows of tomatoes. This year, all his plants rotted. Except for one. One plant with one tomato on it. He was going to save the seeds and use them in field trials next year. If he could develop a new, resistant, strain, he'd be famous. And rich.

He checks the message.

JEFF: He's hysterical.

He listens.

JEFF: Seems all the plants at the research station died. That plant, that tomato, was the only one that survived. He's asking if I know anything about where it got to.

He looks thoughtfully at the last piece of tomato.

JEFF: I could have tomatoes for the rest of my life. *(beat)* But I'd be eating them in jail. *(beat)* Maybe I could make a deal...

He stares intently at the tomato.

JEFF: But why take a chance?

He gobbles up the last slice, sighs, licks his fingers. He wipes the board and blade with toilet paper and tosses that and his napkin underneath him. He stands up. BLACKOUT and sound of a flush.