

THE GREAT ZUCCHINI WAR

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We figured the Utah Mormons started it, because they were the gardening crowd.

Now, to most of the Saints in the College Village Ward, my family and I were Utah Mormons, since we had come to the university town from BYU so Jeff could get his PhD. As a convert from Oklahoma married to a many-generations Mormon who grew up in Boston, and as the working mother of only one child, I did feel closer to being a Utah Mormon than I did to being, say, a Martian—but not a whole lot.

Anyway, we weren't "Utah" enough to anticipate a vegetable war. The first salvo was fired on a hot July Sunday, when we parked in the church parking lot and left the car unlocked and the windows down. The skimpy trees around our genuine Salt Lake-issue stage-one chapel didn't provide much shade, yet, so the vinyl car seats would otherwise be hot as branding irons when we came out of our meetings; nevertheless, it was our first mistake. I noticed the car next to us had its windows rolled up, was locked tight, and had roll-down window shades on the side windows and a California Raisins fold-out dashboard protector visible through the windshield. But it was a much newer car than ours, so I didn't think much of it. Especially since the visual aids I'd brought so the Primary kids could sing "Oh, What Do You Do in the Summertime?"—including lemonade glass, poster-board clouds, stick-and-string fishing pole, black fabric sky with Reynolds Wrap stars, and an American flag for the "parade"—were breaking out of their ancient tote bag, and Marisa was about to pull my skirt right off if I didn't pick her up. It was Sunday.

Three hours later, I discovered what we really do in the summertime. We grow zucchini. Well, our family doesn't, but apparently everyone else in the ward did, because our car was so packed with grocery sacks of green, sausage-like squash that the three of us could hardly fit inside. There were a few sacks of tomatoes in there, too, which gave the car a vaguely yuletide appearance and underdone-casserole smell. I was in no mood, after a long-winded high council speaker in sacrament meeting and two hours in Primary, to think much further than "We'll unload the car after dinner."

I was trying to hold Marisa and dig her car seat out from under a sack of zucchini bounty when she noticed one specimen that looked like a two-foot baseball bat and started to scream, scrambling down me and running to crawl up Jeff, who was just coming out of the building and was deeply engaged in a discussion of something important (like the BYU football team) when he found himself being treated like nightmare playground equipment. He smiled absent-mindedly, shifted his weight to accommodate his screaming daughter, and finished his sentence before turning from Brother Selkirk to ask Marisa what was wrong. Then he saw the car.

"What the—did you volunteer for some Relief Society thing?" I glanced briefly at the other ward members, fastening their own kids into minivans or herding older kids into their cars. The two-foot baseball-bat zucchini lay there, invitingly within my reach. But no. "I think someone thought we might not be getting our veggies," I replied, with a lame smile, trying to balance my tote bag on top of the pile without squishing any tomatoes.

"What are we supposed to do with all this stuff? What is this stuff, anyway?"

"Zucchini—you know, the squash. Maybe I should have signed up for the homemaking meeting class on ways to fix it."

"Maybe it can be made into something useful, like paper or cloth or building materials. Like soda-pop liters can be recycled to become carpet."

I moved the offensive monster vegetable from sight under some other sacks and began again to buckle Marisa into the car. “After you finish up, I’ll go get *my* PhD—on zucchini. I’ll win the Nobel Prize for inventing a zucchini composite that could survive reentry from outer space.”

We laughed and shifted a few bags so we could get into the car and go home. After all, people were just sharing their surplus and it got a little out of hand. That’s what we thought at first.

As it happened, I didn’t need to learn how to cook zucchini beyond the elementary method of slicing up the small, tender ones (the few, the proud, among our gifts) and steaming them a little. My wedding-gift Betty Crocker cookbook got me that far. Beyond that, the College Village Ward was my tutor. On Monday, the Olsens brought zucchini bread, along with the recipe and yet another bag of the stuff. They left it on the doorstep, rang the bell, and ran, but we recognized the car. On Tuesday, my visiting teacher said she knew I was really busy at work and brought over a casserole for dinner, the chief ingredient of which was zucchini.

When Jeff came to bed that night, I was still awake. I waited till he got settled and asked, “What are we going to do?”

He rolled over and stroked my hair. “Is there something you wanted to do, sweetheart?”

“No—I mean, not right now. What are we going to do about the zucchini?”

If you can see disappointment in the dark, then I guess I’m not the only one who’s seen it. Jeff sighed and rolled onto his back, but he did reach over to keep stroking my hair, with less enthusiasm than before. “Oh. Why don’t you throw it away?” he asked.

“I can’t do that. It would be wasting food. Children are starving in—somewhere. And don’t say to pack up the zucchini and send it to them.”

“So wait till it gets moldy and then you can throw it away.”

“And have a great excuse to clean out the refrigerator. My idea of a good time. Could you rub the back of my neck a little?”

“Mm-hmm.” Jeff shifted to reach the back of my neck. “You worry too much.”

“That feels so good. I’m feeling more relaxed.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmmmmm.”

Somehow the subject of zucchini was lost in the moment. But that moment, like so many you’d like to hang on to, was fleeting.

Our cup ran over on Thursday after Mutual, when some young women brought by a plate of zucchini cookies—which I didn’t even know were possible. I smiled and thanked them and, immediately after closing the front door, flung the cookies, paper plate and all, against the living room wall and burst into tears. Marisa, who was playing on the floor across the room, also started to cry, of course, but we both were reduced to an astonished whimper when we looked up to see that two of the cookies stuck. To the wall, I mean.

Jeff came bounding down the stairs, sweat-suited and with a basketball cradled in his arms. “I’m going over to the church to play—” His voice trailed off at the sight of his tearful wife and daughter staring at the cookies stuck to the wall and the rest of the cookies scattered on the carpet. The paper plate had skidded under the couch.

“Those cookies are made of—?” he began.

“Don’t say it!” I said, unleashing a fresh onslaught of tears. Marisa joined in.

“I don’t get it,” Jeff said. “If the house caught fire or we had been burglarized, I’d like to think we’d know what to do. How do you defend against slow death by vegetable donation?”

Marisa and I were still snuffling. “Maybe I should stay home?” Jeff asked. I appreciated the gesture but knew it was intended only as such. I shook my head. There was nothing he could do, but I still felt like a victim. “Don’t tell anyone,” I said. He smiled and sort of hugged me on his way out the door. There are still two faint, greasy, irregular cookie-shaped marks on the wall that we can’t scrub off.

“You know, Jeff,” I said the next evening as I looked over the Olsens’ zucchini bread recipe, “The zucchini is just filler. It doesn’t taste like anything, so you can shred it and mix it into any recipe.”

He withdrew from the computer printout he had been examining intimately since Marisa went to bed. “Can you mix it into my dissertation?”

“That would make it a lot heavier, if that’s what you need. This one loaf of bread has an entire cup of vegetable oil in it. I find that repulsive.”

“I find that expensive.”

Cooking oil was indeed expensive, so we restrained any impulses we may have had toward zucchini bread. And on Saturday morning at the grocery store, when I saw that zucchini (they called it “Italian squash”) was selling for 33 cents a pound, we laughed hard enough to attract attention from other shoppers. “What, Mommy?” Marisa asked.

“You know that green vegetable that people keep giving us for free? They’re selling it here.”

She didn’t get it.

Perhaps because the week had been so full of zucchini, we were lulled into thinking that Sunday would be a day of rest from it, a sort of squash Sabbath. Fools that we were, we again left the car unlocked and windows rolled down. Jeff got to the car first after our meetings, and as Marisa and I approached and saw him standing, defeated, by the driver’s-side door, I knew exactly what kind of fools we were. Once again, our car looked like the final resting place for zucchini with pituitary problems. These weren’t young, succulent, side-dish zucchini; these were large, dense, seed-laden zucchini, with a few bags of tomatoes for added color. We did like the home-grown tomatoes, but all the squash?

I decided it was time for action. Sharon Baumgartner was shepherding her four boys toward their station wagon when I smiled and stopped her. “Apparently somebody thinks we need zucchini, but we really have quite a bit. Could you use some?”

“No, thanks,” she said with a knowing smile and went on shepherding.

The Marshalls only had one teenager left at home, but teenagers eat a lot. Polly Marshall wasn't buying. "We have a large garden, dear. Lots of zucchini already." From the way she smiled, I wondered if the Marshalls hadn't contributed one of the sacks of charity to our car. I dismissed the thought as paranoia, but after Brother Wald turned me down (I even told him Sister Wald would be delighted to get the fresh produce), I knew. We would once again have sacks of zucchini on every kitchen counter. We had yet to experiment with non-food uses.

That evening at Primary in-service I cornered LaVella Curry, a "lifer" and a genuine Utah Mormon. "Tell me about zucchini," I asked, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice.

"Are you the designated recipient this year?" she asked.

"It would seem so."

She sighed. "Zucchini grows anywhere. Profusely. After a nuclear attack, zucchini and cockroaches will be left. Sometimes it grows again next year, even when you didn't plant it. It has huge leaves that hide the good little zucchini until they grow to the size of the pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. But it's against everything we've been taught to waste food. You're graduate students and you don't have room for a garden, so you're prime targets. You're also new to the ward this summer—have you noticed that everyone else is closing up their cars during church, even though they risk second-degree burns on sunny days?"

I nodded.

"See, they learned last year, or the year before that. You are the victims of generosity and guilt. Nasty combination."

On Monday morning, I called the food bank to ask if they wanted our zucchini. No thanks, they had plenty. That night, we carved large zucchini into jack-o'-lantern-like creations, put candles inside, and displayed them on the balcony off our bedroom for family home evening. Marisa was delighted.

I prepared a ratatouille of zucchini and tomatoes for the chipmunk who lived under the back porch. After three days, he quit coming.

Jeff volunteered to take zucchini to school with him as an offering to the famously aggressive Avery State Attack Squirrels. The voracious little creatures weren't shy of anyone sitting on a bench under the trees shading that venerable institution, especially when the bench-sitter was trying to eat lunch. So Jeff went off with a plastic bag of zucchini chunks in his backpack. My hopes ran high; those squirrels had been rumored to try to eat sleeping students. But Jeff was in a foul mood when I got home from work. It was the zucchini's fault.

"There I was, risking rabies to give little furry creatures some variety in their diet," he said. "Meanwhile, their friends were stealing my peanut butter sandwich and the granola bar that I'd left on the bench. I was starving all afternoon." And he looked at me as though I had trained the squirrels to steal his lunch myself.

That's when I got serious, maybe even reckless.

Our neighbor, the Art Student Who Had Wild Parties (as we always referred to him), was surprised when he opened his apartment door and the Mormon Woman Next Door (me) was standing there, laden with the largest specimens of zucchini we had received. "Hi!" I said brightly. "Do you sculpt?"

He didn't seem to think I was crazy; maybe he was used to the extraordinary. "Do you want to put that stuff down?" he asked and made the crucial mistake of allowing me to enter his apartment and put the squash down on the floor. One of them rolled and wobbled across the living room and bumped into a stereo speaker. He winced.

"I thought you might be able to create something out of these, being an artist," I said, feeling like an idiot and smiling my best "Golden Questions" smile.

He looked at the pile of zucchini, then at me. "Well—I guess I could try. Did you grow this stuff?"

"It was a gift."

His eyes met mine with some understanding. "You could just throw it away."

“Oh, no, I think—well, it could be useful.”

“There’s always casserole.”

I managed a weak laugh. I didn’t look too closely at the contents of the dumpster that week, but we did become friends with the Art Student Who Had Wild Parties, who turned out to be named Rick and might be famous someday, but not for vegetable art.

By Friday night, I was eternally tired of the sight and smell of zucchini, but there was still some crowding the refrigerator. I slammed my way into the car and sped down to Kmart, where I bought some craft supplies and a fold-out cardboard windshield protector, which was 99 cents. The only choices were a giant Budweiser beer label or a bikini-clad, buxom sunbather, so I chose to sacrifice the Word of Wisdom to the law of chastity. As a result, Marisa after couple of years could recite “This is the famous Budweiser beer. We know of no brand—,” etc., etc., complete with “exclusive beechwood aging,” to the amazement of her friends and the distress of their parents. I didn’t see the long-term implications; I only wanted to be able to lock my car on Sunday. I practiced rolling up car windows so they would squish the edges of old towels that could hang down to shade the seats. I moved boxes of Christmas ornaments and baby clothes we’d crammed into the closet under the stairs to find, and open for the first time, my sister-in-law’s Christmas gift of two years ago: a food dehydrator.

I would beat them at their own game. I spent Saturday slicing and drying zucchini. Jeff tiptoed around and made lunch for himself and Marisa; with my apron and rather large knife, I was a woman possessed. He tried: “You shouldn’t spend all day on this. Why don’t I use my leverage as sacrament meeting chorister to threaten them with having to sing ‘There is Sunshine in My Soul Today’ every Sunday until this stops?”

There was no sunshine in my soul. It could be Thanksgiving before the guilt-and-generosity zucchini fest let up. So I invented retaliatory kindness. By Sunday morning, all was ready. Jeff wouldn’t park in the

church lot with that Budweiser thing visible through the windshield, so we parked a couple of blocks away. He carried Marisa and I carried my Primary visual aids and other stuff in the laundry basket, which I had emptied for the purpose and wiped out in case of contamination from the dirty clothes.

After sacrament meeting, I hurried to catch up with the Relief Society homemaking counselor, Sister Abbott. Since we hadn't exchanged more than two words, ever, I thought I'd better introduce myself, but after that I unveiled my gift. "I thought these would fit perfectly with the theme for our homemaking meeting this month," I said with feigned innocence and presented her with the fruits of my labors: for every sister in the ward, a new (and slightly brittle) refrigerator magnet made of a slice of dried zucchini and painted with the popular legend, "Bloom Where You Are Planted."

Sister Abbott was momentarily speechless but recovered and said a lot of nice things about all the work I'd gone to and how cute the magnets were—way too many nice things, really. My conscience twinged, but I repressed it with the hope of a blissfully zucchini-free refrigerator.

I've been thinking, though—maybe I'll ask the landlord next spring if I can dig up a small space by the back porch for a garden. If the resident chipmunk doesn't like vegetables, the garden could stand a chance. I wouldn't plant anything delicate that required a lot of skill or attention. And of course, not any zucchini. Certainly not. I didn't even keep a refrigerator magnet for myself.

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