

外婆院里的白玉兰

外婆院里的白玉兰，是我见过的最沉得住气的东西。它跟别家不一样，花苞入冬就立上了枝头，一支一支，裹着灰绒，站在光枝上挨冻。别的花草外婆都搬进屋、盖草帘，只有那棵树，她说搬不了，也不用。有一年冬天特别冷，我担心那些苞冻坏，问外婆要不要包点布。她说这树在她嫁过来之前就在，冻了一辈子，没冻坏过一回。

开是在一夜之间。寒假在乡下，有天清早起来，推开房门，满树全白了，白得院子里都亮堂。前一天傍晚才开了两三朵。我站在院里看，外婆在屋里喊我吃饭，喊了两遍我才动。那花开得大，一朵一捧，花瓣厚实，立在枝头朝天开着，不垂头，也不挤。花香是走到树下才闻到的，不迫人，人走近它才给。外婆端碗出来也抬头看，说今年开得多，是个好年成，说完就去喂鸡了。她看这树，像看一个熟透了的亲戚，不稀奇，但高兴。

花落是清明前后。乡下清晨，我先听见院里扑扑的轻响，出去看，地上一朵一朵整朵的白花，花瓣还硬挺，落在青砖上，落在石磨上。扫院子的外婆把它们一朵一朵拾进簸箕，说完整的能摊在纸上收着，压在枕头里香一夏天。我帮她拾，一簸箕装了十几朵。落满地的清晨不凄凉，反而干净，白花配青砖，像谁摆出来的。

外婆前年冬天走了。今年寒假回去，玉兰又立上了苞，一支一支站在光枝上，跟往年一样。我在树下站了很久，想起她说的冻了一辈子没冻坏过一回，想起她说今年开得多是好年成。那棵树不声不响，苞举一冬，开一夜，落一地，年年这样，把日子过得又稳又清楚。我现在遇到急的事，会想起院里的玉兰，想起外婆在树底下喂鸡、扫花、把整朵的花拾进簸箕。她们都不快，但都没误过事。风一过，枝头的苞轻轻点了一下头，像应了一声。

The White Yulania in Grandmother's Yard

The white yulania in my grandmother's yard is the most patient thing I have ever seen. It differs from other trees. Its buds set on the branches at the start of winter, one by one, wrapped in gray fuzz, standing bare in the cold. Grandmother moved every other plant indoors or covered them with straw mats, but not that tree. She said it could not be moved, and did not need to be. One winter was bitterly cold. I worried the buds would freeze and asked if we should wrap them in cloth. She said the tree was there before she married into the family, had weathered a lifetime of cold, and never once been hurt.

It bloomed overnight. I was spending winter break in the village, and one early morning I opened my door to find the whole tree white, so bright the yard glowed. Only two or three blooms had opened the previous evening. I stood in the yard staring. Grandmother called me to breakfast from the house, and I only moved on the second call. The flowers were large, each one a handful, thick petals standing upright on the branches facing the sky, neither bowing nor crowding. The scent reached you only under the tree. It did not chase people. It gave itself to whoever came close. Grandmother came out with her bowl and looked up too, saying there were

many blooms this year, a sign of a good season, then went off to feed the chickens. She regarded the tree like a well-known relative, no surprise, but gladness.

The flowers fell around Qingming. In the village mornings I first heard soft thuds in the yard. Outside, the ground held flower after flower, whole white blooms, petals still firm, fallen on the blue bricks, on the stone mill. Grandmother, sweeping the yard, picked them up one by one into a dustpan, saying the intact ones could be dried on paper and tucked in a pillow to scent the whole summer. I helped her. The dustpan held a dozen. The morning yard full of fallen flowers was not desolate but clean, white blossoms on blue brick, as if someone had arranged them.

Grandmother passed away the winter before last. This winter break when I went back, the yulania had set its buds again, one by one on the bare branches, same as any year. I stood under it a long time, remembering her saying it had weathered a lifetime of cold without harm, remembering her saying many blooms meant a good season. That tree, silent and unhurried, holds its buds a whole winter, opens in one night, drops to the ground in whole flowers, year after year, living its days steady and clear. Now when something urgent comes, I think of the yulania in the yard, and of grandmother feeding chickens under it, sweeping the blooms, lifting whole flowers into her dustpan. Neither of them was fast, and neither ever missed what mattered. A gust of wind passed, and a bud on the branch nodded once, like an answer.