刷烂的三片叶子也算数

10月26日，星期日，晴。周日下午，我把一片桂花叶举到窗前对着光。叶肉透明得只剩叶脉，细细的，像一匹纱，光能从里面穿过来。我把它夹进语文书，这是我这周做成的一样东西。

可是三天前，这片叶子还长在小区那棵桂花树上，而我对做叶脉书签一无所知。周五晚上我查了资料，说书签是把叶肉煮烂刷掉，只留叶脉，要用碱水。我记下方子：食用碱、水煮、牙刷。

周六早上我第一次做。锅里接了水，挖了一勺食用碱，丢进几片老桂花叶，煮了二十分钟。捞出来，叶肉还牢牢粘着。我把叶子摊在桌上，拿旧牙刷一刷，叶子当场烂成一团绿泥。第一次，失败。

我不死心，晚上又去查。有人说碱要足量，有人说要煮到叶子发黑、一捏就软，刷的时候要顺着叶脉，从叶尖往叶柄的方向，力道要轻，刷子要旧的、毛软的。我把这些记在纸条上，和第一次的做法一条条对照，发现自己每一步都差了一点：碱放少了，时间煮短了，刷子还是把硬毛的新牙刷。

周日上午我调整重来。碱加到三倍，水换干净的，这次煮到叶子发黑、用镊子一捏就软才停火。我把叶子摊在玻璃板上，蘸着水，用旧牙刷从叶尖起第一下。第一片刷破了，第二片刷到一半也破了。第三片我屏住气，刷子几乎不使劲，叶肉一层一层退下去，叶脉像一张渔网，慢慢露出来。

我把它吸干、压平，在叶柄上穿了根红线，又用旧报纸压了一晚上。现在它夹在语文书第十四课的位置，等期末复习的时候我再把它抽出来。

我在日记里写：那三片刷烂的叶子也算数。成功是从它们身上一点一点省出来的。

The Three Leaves I Ruined Still Count

October 26, Sunday, sunny. This afternoon I held an osmanthus leaf up to the window, against the light. The leaf flesh was gone, transparent down to the veins, fine as gauze, with light passing through them. I tucked it into my Chinese textbook. It is one of the things I finished this week.

Three days ago this leaf was still on the osmanthus tree in our neighborhood, and I knew nothing about leaf-vein bookmarks. On Friday night I looked it up: you boil the leaf in alkaline water until the flesh softens, brush the flesh away, and keep the veins. I wrote down the recipe: baking soda, boiling water, a toothbrush.

On Saturday morning I made my first attempt. I filled the pot with water, scooped in a spoon of baking soda, dropped in a few old osmanthus leaves, and boiled them for twenty minutes. Out of the pot, the flesh still clung on. I spread a leaf on the table, touched it with an old toothbrush, and it collapsed into green mud. Attempt one, failed.

Not ready to give up, I went back to the references that night. Some said use enough alkali; some said boil until the leaf turns black and yields to a pinch; some said brush along the veins, from tip toward the stem, with almost no pressure, and use an old brush with soft bristles. I noted all of it on a slip of paper and compared it line by line with my first attempt. Every single step had been off: too little alkali, too short a boil, and my brush was a brand-new one with stiff bristles.

Sunday morning I adjusted and started over. I tripled the alkali, used clean water, and boiled until the leaves turned black and went soft under tweezers. I laid one on a glass board, dipped the brush in water, and made the first stroke at the tip. The first leaf tore. The second tore halfway. On the third I held my breath, the brush barely pressing, and the flesh peeled away layer by layer until the veins emerged like a fishing net.

I blotted it dry, pressed it flat, tied a red thread to the stem, and left it under old newspaper overnight. It now sits at Lesson Fourteen of my Chinese textbook, and I will pull it out again when final review comes.

I wrote in my diary: the three leaves I ruined still count. The success was saved out of them, little by little.

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