玉米地里的第一天：掰玉米的啪嗒声

八月三日 星期一 晴

今天早上五点多，奶奶就起来了。我起床的时候，听见她在院子里忙活：水桶磕了一下，空麻袋抖得哗啦响。今天要去地里掰玉米。奶奶常说，玉米要赶早掰，太阳一毒，玉米棒子发软，一碰就掉粒。我上六年级了，暑假开始前我就跟自己说好，这回要实实在在帮奶奶干一天，一句苦都不叫。今天早上，我兑现了自己的话。

玉米地在村外的坡上，去的地里那条路很窄，两边的草扫着我的腿。奶奶在前面肩上挎着两个空麻袋，我在后面抱着大水壶。一进地，玉米秆比我还高，叶子又长又利，像一把把立着的剑，边上带细齿，第一下扫过胳膊，就留下一道白印子，火辣辣的。地太密，奶奶往旁边挪两行我就看不见她人了，只听见她的手在响：啪嗒，啪嗒，啪嗒。

奶奶教我掰玉米：手握住棒子中间，往下压，再一拧，啪嗒一声就下来了。我第一个攥住使劲拽，整棵秆子晃来晃去，棒子不下来；第二个拧得太轻，只撕下来一把苞叶；第三个我憋足了劲，差点把整棵玉米连根拔起来。奶奶从两行外走过来，没接我手里的棒子，只把我的手包住，带着我往下压、一拧。啪嗒。棒子干干净净下来了，苞叶翻开一小圈，像给它围了条围巾。她说了句：劲儿在手腕上，不在胳膊上。后头我越掰越顺，每响一声啪嗒，都像赢了一小局。

掰了差不多一个小时，筐就满了。我的手掌让玉米叶和玉米须磨得发涩，指头肚上叫苞叶划了几道小红印，后背痒在一个手够不着的地方，汗顺着下巴滴进土里，眼睛让汗杀得睁不开，眯眼看太阳，眼前全是花。我坐到地埂上，想歇够本再起来。奶奶还在掰，她的背弯得像一张拉满的弓，手却一直没停。我忽然想起来，她在这个坡上弯着腰，一年又一年，多少个夏天了。我站起来：奶奶能接着掰，我也能。

下午我们又掰满两筐。回家路上，筐里的玉米棒子堆成小山，散开的苞叶支棱在四周，像刺猬的背。下坡的时候腿沉，一步是一步，心却轻快，我一路跟奶奶说，哪一行的玉米最大，哪一棵上还有俩没掰。晚饭是青椒炒肉丝，我吃了两碗饭，菜格外香。我想，这就是干过活以后真正的饿吧。

今晚的日记我要写：玉米地里的第一天，我学会了手腕往下压再一拧，学会了听见啪嗒一声就高兴。我还学会了一件课本上没有的事：奶奶的腰疼，不是坐出来的，是替太阳还没出来的每一个早上，一年一年弯出来的。

My First Day in the Cornfield: The Snap of Breaking Off Corn

August 3rd, Monday, Sunny

Before five o’clock this morning, Grandma was already up. When I got out of bed, I could hear her moving around in the courtyard: the water bucket knocking once, the

empty sacks being shaken out with a rustle. Today we were going to the field to pick corn. Grandma always says that corn must be picked early, because once the sun gets strong the cobs turn soft and the kernels crack off at a touch. I am in the sixth grade now, and before this summer vacation started I made up my mind that this time I would help Grandma for one real day and not complain even once. This morning I kept that promise.

The cornfield is on the hillside outside the village. The path to it is narrow, with tall grass brushing against my legs on both sides. Grandma walked in front with two empty sacks over her shoulder, and I walked behind hugging the big water bottle. As soon as I stepped into the field, the corn plants towered above my head. The leaves are long and sharp like upright swords, and their edges carry tiny saw teeth. The first time a leaf swept across my arm it left a thin white line that stung for a while. The plants grow so close together that when Grandma moved two rows sideways I could no longer see her, and all I could hear were her hands working: snap, snap, snap.

Grandma taught me how to pick: grip the cob in the middle, press it down hard, then twist, and it comes off with a snap. For the first one I grabbed the cob and pulled with all my strength, and the whole plant swayed back and forth but the cob stayed on. For the second one I twisted too gently and only tore off a fistful of husk leaves. For the third one I put my whole body into it and nearly uprooted the entire plant. Grandma walked over from two rows away. She did not take the cob out of my hands. She just wrapped her hand around mine, pressed down with me, and twisted. Snap. The cob came off clean, and the husk peeled back in a little ring, like a scarf around its neck. She said one sentence: the strength lives in the wrist, not in the arm. After that I picked faster and faster, and every snap felt like winning one small round.

After about one hour the basket was full. My palms were rough from the corn leaves and the silky corn threads, my fingertips carried several small red cuts from the husks, my back itched in a place my hand could never reach, and sweat ran down my chin and dropped into the soil. The sweat got into my eyes and stung so much I could barely keep them open, and when I squinted at the sun I saw sparks of light everywhere. I sat down on the ridge between the fields and wanted to rest until I had rested enough. Grandma was still picking. Her back was bent like a bow drawn full, but her hands never stopped for a second. Then it suddenly hit me that she has bent over like this on this hillside year after year, summer after summer, for more summers than I can count. I stood up. If Grandma can keep picking, so can I.

In the afternoon we filled two more baskets. On the way home the cobs were piled in the baskets like small mountains, and the loose husk leaves stuck out on every side like the spines of a hedgehog. Going down the slope my legs felt heavy, one step

after another, but my heart was light, and the whole way I talked to Grandma about which row had the biggest corn and which plant still had two cobs left on it. For dinner we had green pepper with shredded pork, and I ate two bowls of rice, and every bite tasted wonderful. I think this must be what real hunger after real work tastes like.

In tonight's diary I want to write this: on my first day in the cornfield, I learned to press down and twist with my wrist, and I learned to feel happy at the sound of a snap. I also learned something that is not in any textbook. Grandma's sore back did not come from sitting around. It came from bending over in the fields on all the mornings when the sun had not even risen yet, one year after another, and nobody ever counted those mornings for her.

装袋的学问：奶奶说装得紧才算装满

八月五日 星期三 晴

今天的任务是把掰下来的玉米装进麻袋，一袋一袋抬到路边，等三轮车来拉。我原以为这是最轻快的一步：玉米都出地了，装进袋子里能有多难？奶奶说，装袋是有学问的。我很快就知道，她说的不是吓唬人。

第一步，撑口袋。奶奶两手抓住袋口，往空中一抖，麻袋砰地张开，像被人从睡梦里叫醒。我照着抖，我的袋子怎么都不开，最后我趴下去对着袋口吹了一口气，它砰地开了，一股陈年的灰腾起来，正扑在我脸上，我连着打了十个喷嚏。奶奶笑：袋里的灰是去年玉米上的，你得先跟它打声招呼。

第二步，装。奶奶的规矩是：先装大棒子，一根一根码平放正，小棒子和断的、掉了粒的，后头见缝插空填进去，像砌墙拿小石子塞大石头缝。我胡乱往里扔，大的压小的，扔满了，袋子鼓出好几个硬角，袋口合不拢。奶奶把我装的倒出来，当着我的面重新码，一根一根放平、转一转、卡一卡。同一只袋子，她装得比我多三分之一还多。我看得嘴都合不上。奶奶说：松松垮垮的不叫装满，装得紧才叫装满。

最难的是扎袋口。奶奶把袋口两个角拢到一起，拧成一股绳，再往回一别，压在上一层玉米底下，一拽，袋子就长死了。我照着做，拧两下就松，我的袋口整个炸开，玉米棒子骨碌碌滚了一地，有几个顺着坡往下跑，我满场去追，地里砰砰响，像下玉米雹子。我耳朵都臊热了，奶奶不骂我，只说：不会就多扎十次，第十一次就会了。我就在那只不听话的袋子上扎了拆、拆了扎。第十一次，袋口咬住了。我站起来冲地里喊了一嗓子，声音传出老远。

一共装了八袋。奶奶蹲下去，胳膊往袋子底下一插，一使劲就上了肩，像拎起一篮空气。我挑了最小的一袋试，扛起来腿先抖，我弓着背走了十步，肩膀又红又烫。奶奶说一袋平常八十斤。八十斤，她从地里扛到路边，再从路边扛回家，她自己腰疼的日子也照扛，一句都不叫。

三轮车来的时候，师傅看看八只袋子，再看看我：大娘，孙子都下地帮你啦，你有福。奶奶笑了，眼角的皱纹挤成两扇合起来的小门。

今晚肩膀疼得握笔都费劲，妈妈给我贴了一片止痛膏。我写得很慢，因为我想把一袋玉米到底有多重记清楚：它不光是一袋玉米，它是奶奶年年扛着它、从来没叫我扛过的那些年。

The Art of Filling the Sacks: Grandma Says a Tight Sack Is a Full Sack

August 5th, Wednesday, Sunny

Today's job was to put the picked corn into sacks and carry the sacks to the roadside, where the tricycle would come to pick them up. I thought this would be the easy part. The corn was already out of the field, so how hard could putting it into a bag be? Grandma told me that filling a sack is a real skill with its own learning curve, and I quickly found out she was not trying to scare me.

The first step is opening the sack. Grandma grabbed the mouth of the sack with both hands and shook it twice in the air, and the sack popped open like somebody had woken it from a sleep. I tried the same thing, but my sack stayed shut no matter how hard I shook it. Finally I leaned down and blew air into the mouth of it. It opened with a poof, and a cloud of old dust rose straight into my face, and I sneezed ten times in a row. Grandma laughed and said the dust inside the sacks came from last year's corn, so the polite thing was to say hello to it first.

The second step is filling. Grandma's rule: big cobs go in first, laid flat and neat one by one, and the small cobs and the broken ones and the ones that lost some kernels fill the gaps afterwards, the way a mason wedges small stones into the cracks between big rocks. I threw cobs in any which way, big on top of small, and when I thought it was full, the sack bulged with hard corners and the mouth would not come together. Grandma emptied out everything I had done and refilled the sack in front of me, laying each cob down on purpose, turning it, fitting it into place. The same sack, filled her way, held one third more corn than filled my way. I stood there with my mouth hanging open. Grandma said: a loose sack is not a full sack; only a tight sack is a full sack.

The hardest part is tying the mouth. Grandma gathered the two corners of the sack mouth together, twisted them round and round into a rope, folded the rope back, and tucked it under the top layer of corn, and one pull closed the sack as if it had grown shut. I copied her, but my twist kept slipping loose, and then the whole mouth of my sack burst open and cobs rolled everywhere. A few of them started rolling down

the slope, and I chased them all over the field, and the ground went thump-thump-thump like it was hailing corn. My ears went hot with embarrassment. Grandma did not scold me. She only said: if you cannot do it, tie it ten more times, and on the eleventh time you will be able to. So on that one stubborn sack I tied and untied, untied and tied. On the eleventh try, the mouth of the sack bit down and held. I stood up and shouted across the field, and my voice carried a long way.

In the end we filled eight sacks. Grandma squatted down, slid her arm under one, and lifted it onto her shoulder in one smooth motion, like lifting a basket of air. I wanted to try, so I chose the smallest sack and got it up, and my legs started shaking before I had even taken a step. I walked bent almost in half, ten steps, and my shoulder turned red and hot under my shirt. Grandma said a normal sack weighs eighty jin. Eighty jin, and she carries it from the field to the road, and from the road back home, and she carries it on days when her own back already hurts, without a single complaint.

When the tricycle arrived, the driver looked at the eight sacks, then looked at me, and said: Grandma, even your grandson has come down to the field to help you — you are a lucky woman. Grandma laughed so hard that the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes squeezed shut like two little doors closing.

Tonight my shoulders ache so much that holding the pen feels like work by itself, and Mom found a pain patch and stuck it on for me. I am writing this diary slowly on purpose, because I want to remember exactly how heavy one sack of corn is. It is not only a sack of corn. It is all those years Grandma carried it by herself, and never once asked me to carry it for her.

奶奶的玉米：院子里铺了一地太阳

八月九日 星期日 晴

玉米全部收完了，现在摊在院子里晒。奶奶把它们在水泥地上铺成一大片金黄，从早到晚拿木锨走过去走过去地翻，把底下的翻上来。她说玉米不翻，底下的会返潮发霉，霉起来一片都毁在两天里。整个院子让太阳照得金亮，像谁把一整块田里的阳光打翻在我们家地上。连鸡都走进来踩两步，又退出去，好像也知道这堆金子不是给它们的。

奶奶今年七十二岁。妈妈接她去城里住过两回，她都待不住，说城里的楼前头没有地，没得种她会闷出病来。这回收玉米，她每天五点多就起。我的手叫玉米叶拉了几道口子，差点哭出来，她说手拉得多了就长茧。她说这话的时候我盯着她的手看：她手心的茧一层压一层，硬得发亮，指关节又粗又大，有两个指头已经伸不直了。那些茧不是装饰，是五十个夏天干完活留下的收据。

傍晚，奶奶把卖不掉的细玉米煮了一锅。白汽从锅里一团一团冒出来，煮玉米的甜味漫满整个院子，一直飘到邻居家那边去。奶奶从锅里挑出两根最粗最饱满的，先放进我碗里，谁都没给，先给我。我掰回去一根给她，她又掰回来给我，说她牙不好，咬不动硬的。我知道不是她牙不好——她年年都这么说，年年自己吃最小的那几根。这一回我吃得特别慢，像吃一样舍不得吃完的东西。那是我吃过最甜的玉米。也可能不是玉米甜，是奶奶先给我的那一下甜。

奶奶把晒好的头一等玉米装袋，给城里的姑姑留了三大袋，剩下的留着喂鸡。她说玉米放不住，趁新鲜赶紧分。我站在旁边看她给姑姑装袋，一袋一袋扎紧，忽然想明白一件事：她一年到头种出来的东西，几乎都送人了——给姑姑，给邻居，给我们，她自己留的那一份最小，还从来不提。

今晚我做了个决定，写进日记里，就算数了：明年暑假，我提前一个星期回来。到那时候，我已经会装紧一袋玉米，会扎住袋口不炸开，会用手腕啪嗒一声掰下棒子。早上我可以替奶奶拿木锨翻院子里的玉米，小袋子我来扛，八十斤不用她一个人扛。奶奶七十二了，背弯得像弓，可她的手还认得那块地里的每一行。她还想让我在地里，我还扛得动袋子——这样的年头，我想一年一年帮下去。

Grandma's Corn: A Courtyard Full of Spilled Sunlight

August 9th, Sunday, Sunny

All the corn is finally harvested, and now it is drying out in our courtyard. Grandma spread it across the concrete ground in one big golden layer, and from morning until evening she walks through it with a wooden shovel, turning the kernels from underneath up to the top. She says if you do not turn the corn, the layer underneath stays damp and grows mold, and once the mold starts, a whole pile is ruined inside two days. The entire courtyard glows gold under the sun, like somebody spilled a whole field of sunlight onto our ground. Even the chickens walk in, take two steps, and back out again, as if they somehow know that this pile of gold is not for them.

Grandma is seventy-two years old this year. Mom took her to live in the city twice, and both times she could not stand it and came back. She said the apartments in the city have no field in front of them, and if she has nothing to plant she will sicken from boredom. During this corn harvest she got up before five every single morning. My hands got several cuts from the corn leaves and I nearly cried, and she told me that hands which get cut often grow calluses. While she was saying it, I stared at her hands. The calluses on her palms lie in layer upon layer, hard and shiny, her knuckles are thick and swollen, and two of her fingers cannot straighten out all the way anymore. Those calluses are not decoration. They are the receipts that fifty summers of hard work left behind.

In the evening, Grandma boiled a big pot of the thin small cobs that were too skinny to sell. Clouds of white steam rose out of the pot, and the sweet smell of boiled corn filled the whole courtyard and drifted all the way over to the neighbor's yard. Grandma fished out the two biggest, plumpest cobs from the pot and put them straight into my bowl before giving anyone else anything. I broke one off and pushed it back to her, and she broke it back toward me, saying her teeth are not good anymore and she cannot chew hard things. I know it is not her teeth. She says that every single year, and every single year she eats the smallest ones herself. This time I ate mine very slowly, the way you eat something you do not want to finish. It was the sweetest corn I have ever tasted. Or maybe it was not the corn that was sweet — maybe it was the moment when Grandma gave it to me first.

Grandma dried the best of the corn and bagged it up: three big sacks set aside for my aunt's family in the city, and the rest kept for the chickens. She said corn does not keep well, so it is better to share it while it is still fresh. I stood beside her watching her fill the bags for my aunt, tying each one tight, and suddenly one thing became clear to me: everything she grows all year long almost entirely goes to other people — to my aunt, to the neighbors, to us — and the share she keeps for herself is always the smallest one, and she never once mentions it.

Tonight I made a decision, and I am writing it into this diary so that it counts: next summer vacation, I will come back to the village one week earlier. By then I will already know how to fill a sack tight, how to tie its mouth so it never bursts, and how to break a cob off with one snap of the wrist. In the mornings I can take the wooden shovel and turn the corn in the courtyard for Grandma, and I can carry the smaller sacks, so that eighty jin never has to sit on her shoulders alone. Grandma is seventy-two, and her back is bent like a bow, but her hands still know every single row in that field. As long as she still wants me in that field with her, and as long as I am strong enough to carry a sack, I want to help her in that field year after year after year.