李奶奶的记事

我每天早上五点半下楼遛弯，都要从老陈的菜园边上过。他比我起得还早，已经蹲在地头了。我喊一声老陈，他抬起头，眉毛上还沾着草屑，答应一声，又低头去看他的黄瓜。

我看他采摘看了一个夏天。他挑黄瓜不看大的，看直的，一只手托住藤，另一只手一拧，咔的一声，黄瓜就下来了，拿衣角擦都不擦，直接放进竹篮。红西红柿他单独装，说那东西娇气，经不得压。小葱拔一把，抖掉根上的泥，往篮子最上面一盖，一只篮子就装满了，齐着篮沿，冒不出头。

八点钟刚过，他孙子就抱着篮子来敲门了。三下，不多不少，是老陈家孙子的敲法。我开门他就说：李奶奶，我爷爷让我送来的，说黄瓜凉拌爽口。孩子抱得紧紧的，像抱着一窝小鸡。

我每次都要留孩子说两句话。有一回我拉着他，想起从前的事，差点掉下泪来。老头子走的那年秋天，老陈第一次给我送菜，也是这只篮子，里头是三个大南瓜、一把韭菜。他说：嫂子，南瓜熬粥，顶饿。那阵子我一个人，屋里静得能听见墙里的水管响。就是那篮菜，把我重新拽回了人堆里。

打那以后，我们两家你来我往。他送我一篮菜，我腌一坛萝卜干回他；他送我一筐西红柿，我给他孙子缝书包带子。菜有季节，情没有季节。

这天我回赠的是一碗绿豆汤，熬得烂，放了红枣，趁温让孩子端着回去。孩子在楼道里走得很慢，一手端碗一手扶栏杆，我跟在后面，忽然觉得这楼道亮堂。

晚上我把吃剩的黄瓜皮晒在阳台上，想起老陈说过，菜分一半出去，才是一幢楼的朋友。我对着阳台底下喊：老陈，明天给我留两根老黄瓜，我腌酱瓜！菜园那头应了一声：好嘞。

Notes from Grandma Li

Every morning at half past five I go downstairs for my walk, and I always pass the vegetable garden of Old Chen. He rises even earlier than I do, already crouching at the head of the field. I call out to him, he lifts his head, grass bits still on his eyebrows, answers with a grunt, and bends back down to his cucumbers.

I have watched him pick vegetables all summer. He does not choose the big cucumbers but the straight ones. One hand holds the vine, the other gives a twist, snap, the cucumber comes off. He does not even wipe it on his clothes, just drops it into the bamboo basket. The red tomatoes go in separately, for he says they are delicate and cannot bear pressure. He pulls a handful of scallions, shakes the soil from their roots, and lays them across the top of the basket. Then the basket is full, level with the rim, nothing sticking out.

Just past eight in the morning, his grandson comes knocking with the basket in his arms. Three knocks, no more, no fewer, that is the way the boy knocks. When I

open the door he says: Grandma Li, my grandpa sent these, he says cucumbers taste freshest dressed with garlic. The boy holds the basket tight, as if carrying a brood of chicks.

Every time I keep the boy for a few words. Once I took his little hand and, remembering the old days, nearly dropped tears. In the autumn of the year my husband passed away, Old Chen sent me vegetables for the first time, in this very basket, with three big pumpkins and a bunch of chives inside. He said: sister, pumpkin makes a filling porridge. In those days I lived alone, and the room was so quiet I could hear the water pipes inside the walls. That single basket of vegetables pulled me back among people.

Since then our two families have kept exchanging. He sends a basket of greens, I send back a jar of pickled radish. He sends a crate of tomatoes, I sew new straps for the schoolbag of his grandson. Vegetables have seasons; friendship does not.

That day my return gift was a bowl of mung bean soup, simmered soft with red dates, still warm as the boy carried it back. He walked very slowly through the stairwell, one hand on the bowl, one hand on the railing, and I followed behind, suddenly feeling that the stairway was bright.

At night I dried the leftover cucumber peels on the balcony and recalled Old Chen saying that a garden shared by half becomes a building of friends. I called down from the balcony: Old Chen, save me two old cucumbers tomorrow, I will pickle them in sauce! From the garden side came the answer: all right.