外婆家的煤炉

雪是后半夜下大的。我迷迷糊糊醒来，听见窗外有一种极轻的沙沙声，像有人隔着一层布在筛米。翻个身再睡，天亮时推开房门，院子里的雪已经没过了脚踝，柴垛变成了一座矮胖的白山。

外婆已经起了。她蹲在堂屋中间，往那只黑铁煤炉里添煤。炉盖揭开，里面的火膛红得像一口小小的井。她夹了一块蜂窝煤放进去，动作很稳，放正了，再盖上盖，壶坐上去。水还没开，壶底先响，咕嘟咕嘟，整间屋子先于太阳醒过来。

外公坐在炉边的矮凳上剥花生。他把花生一颗颗捏开，壳丢进脚边的簸箕，仁攒在搪瓷缸里。他不说话，偶尔朝炉子看一眼，火弱了，他就拿火钳捅两下通条，火星子跳起来，又落回去。

雪还在下。窗户玻璃上蒙了一层水汽，有人用手指在上面画了一条船。屋外白，屋内黄，两种颜色隔窗对望，谁也不服谁。

舅舅下班回来，进门先跺脚，鞋上的雪掉成一圈。他把手伸向炉子上方，手心翻过去翻过来，说这雪怕是要下满一天。外婆说下满好，麦子盖被子，来年馒头肥。这话她年年说，说得理所当然，像雪本来就该为馒头负责。

母亲和舅妈在炉子另一头择菜，说东家长西家短，说到好笑处，笑声压得低低的，怕惊了炉上的水。水一开，壶哨尖声叫起来，外婆提壶冲茶，屋里立刻漫出粗茶的香气，混着煤火的一点硫味。那是我整个童年里冬天的味道。

我们几个孩子是不坐凳子的。我们蹲在炉膛边，把红薯埋在通条够得着的炉灰里。等得人心焦，隔一会儿就问熟没熟。外婆说急什么，红薯跟你们一样，也得烤够时辰。红薯出炉时烫得两手倒换，掰开，红心的，热气扑脸。我们嘴边沾着糖稀，抬头看见一家人的影子都映在墙上，被炉火映得晃晃的，大的小的，挤在一起。

那晚的雪下到掌灯还没停。外公把最后一缸花生剥完，说够吃正月了。舅舅给炉子封了火，压上湿煤，火苗缩成一线，屋子慢慢暗下来，只剩炉门那一小方红。我们各自钻被窝，被子里提前放了汤婆子，是热的。

我躺在黑暗里，听见窗外雪落，听见屋里煤炉偶尔咔的一声，像它翻了个身。我想，外面的冬天那么大，屋里就这么一小炉火，可它把一屋子人都拢在一起了。

多年以后，城里的暖气很足，足到冬天进不了屋子。我再也遇不上那样一个雪夜：炉子坐在屋中央，水开着，花生剥着，闲谈压低了声音，雪在窗外负责把世界变白，一家人负责把火围热。

Grandma's Coal Stove

The snow grew heavy after midnight. I woke groggily and heard an extremely light rustling outside the window, like someone sifting rice through a cloth. I turned over and slept again. At dawn I pushed the door open and the snow in the yard already

covered my ankles; the woodpile had become a short fat white mountain.

Grandma was already up. She squatted in the middle of the main room, feeding coal into the black iron stove. She lifted the lid and the fire chamber inside glowed red like a small well. She set a honeycomb briquette in with a steady hand, straightened it, closed the lid, and put the kettle on. The water had not boiled yet but the kettle bottom began to sing, gurgle gurgle, and the whole room woke before the sun.

Grandpa sat on the low stool by the stove shelling peanuts. He pinched them open one by one, tossed the shells into the winnowing basket at his feet, and saved the kernels in an enamel mug. He did not talk, just glanced at the stove now and then. When the fire weakened he poked the poker through twice, sparks jumped up and fell back.

The snow kept falling. The window glass fogged over, and someone drew a boat on it with a finger. Outside white, inside yellow, the two colors stared at each other through the glass, neither admitting defeat.

My uncle came home from work, stamped his feet at the door, and the snow off his shoes fell in a ring. He held his hands over the stove, turning them palm up palm down, and said this snow would probably fall all day. Grandma said good, let it fall all day, the wheat gets a quilt and next year the steamed buns will be plump. She said this every year, matter of fact, as if snow existed to serve the buns.

Mother and aunt trimmed vegetables on the other side of the stove, talking about this family and that, and when something funny came up they kept their laughter low, afraid of startling the water on the stove. When it boiled the kettle whistled sharp, Grandma lifted it to brew tea, and the coarse tea smell spread through the room, mixed with a touch of sulfur from the coal fire. That was the taste of winter in my whole childhood.

We children never sat on stools. We squatted by the fire chamber and buried sweet potatoes in the ash within reach of the poker. Waiting made our hearts itch, and every little while we asked whether they were done. Grandma said what is the rush, sweet potatoes are like you, they must be roasted their full time. When the potatoes came out we passed them from hand to hand for the heat, broke them open, red-hearted, steam in our faces. With syrup on our lips we looked up and saw the whole family's shadows on the wall, wavering in the firelight, big and small, crowded together.

That night the snow had not stopped by lamplighting time. Grandpa finished the last mug of peanuts and said there were enough for the new year month. Uncle sealed the stove, pressing wet coal on the fire until the flame shrank to a thin line, the room slowly darkened, and only a small square of red remained at the stove door. We each crawled into our quilts, where a hot water bottle had been waiting, already

warm.

lying in the dark I heard snow falling outside, and now and then a click from the coal stove inside, as if it turned over in sleep. I thought, the winter outside is so big, and inside there is only this little stove, yet it gathered the whole family around it.

Years later the city heating is strong, strong enough that winter never enters the room. I never met such a snowy night again: the stove sitting in the middle of the room, water singing, peanuts shelling, talk kept low, snow outside in charge of whitening the world, and the family inside in charge of warming the fire.

今晚的雪，今晚的火

雪是从八点开始下的。我先看见的是阳台上的晾衣杆，一根一根黑线，很快线上各顶起一道白。再往外看，楼下的车棚顶白了，冬青白了，白天刚扫出的那条小路，正一寸一寸地被填平。

雪下得这样认真，却没有声音。整栋楼好像被人按了静音，只剩屋里电陶炉的加热丝偶尔啪地轻响一声。

炉子摆在餐桌中间，是去年冬天买的，扁扁一个，上面坐一把陶壶。壶里是老白茶，汤色已经泡到琥珀。炉边一圈坐着人：妻子剥橘子，女儿摆她从学校带回来的棋，母亲守着壶，说火太小了，又说火太大了。调小也不是，调大也不是，她对着那只炉子的意见，比当年对着煤炉还多。

我负责把橘子一瓣一瓣码在烤网上。橘子烤热了，皮上渗出细油珠，香气是烫过的香气，比生的浓。女儿先抢，烫了手，甩两下，还是吃。

闲谈是从一块年糕开始的。母亲看见年糕，说起她小时候过年，年糕蒸在饭镬上，甜的是糖拌的，咸的是酱油的，她妹妹贪多，把一块咸年糕整个吞下去，噎住，全家拍背。说到拍背，父亲想起他单位老周，打呼噜响得隔壁办公室来敲门。说到老周，妻子想起她外婆家有条狗，见人就作揖。话题这样一路漂下去，没有一句有用，没有一句舍得停。

窗外的雪把小区下成了另一个地方。白覆盖了垃圾桶、电动车、白天那些着急的事。玻璃上开始结霜花，一小片一小片，像谁在窗上种蕨类。女儿忽然说，你们看，雪把路灯都举高了。我们去看，果然，路灯底下堆起的雪，把灯抬离了地面一截，光落下来，先落在雪上，再落到人上。

壶开了，水声细细的。母亲给每人续茶，自己的杯满着，就先不喝，端着。父亲放下报纸，加入战局，说起他年轻时步行二十里去赶集，雪深到小腿，鞋里灌了雪水，走到目的地把鞋脱下来拧，能拧出水来。他说这话时语气平常，像在说别人的事。我和女儿都喊了一声真的假的，他补一句，那年我十五，你们现在这个岁数。

女儿去棋盘边摆了一颗棋子，又跑回来问：爸，你那时候冷不冷？父亲想了想说，脚冷，身

上热，赶集的人一路走一路出汗。这个答案女儿没懂，我也不打算解释。有些冷要自己走一遍才懂。

十点半，烤网第二层的橘子吃完了，壶里的茶淡成米汤色。妻子说明天雪后肯定冷，母亲说明天要扫雪，父亲说明天别迟到。明天的事说到一半就被今晚截住，因为雪忽然下密了，密到路灯下能看见雪片斜着飞。我们四个并排趴在窗上看，像四个孩子。

人到中年才慢慢明白：炉火贵的不是火，是这一炉人都在；闲谈贵的不是话，是没有一句要赶时间。窗外大雪负责把世界清空，屋里炉火负责把时间存起来。存进今晚的，够我们在往后许多个忙乱的日子里，取出来暖一暖手。

睡前最后看了一眼窗外。雪还在下，小区已经白得完整，像一张没写过字的纸。炉子关了，余温还烫。被窝里暖，梦里大概也是白的。

Tonight's Snow, Tonight's Fire

The snow began at eight. What I saw first were the drying poles on the balcony, black line after black line, each soon topped with a ridge of white. Looking further out, the shed roof below turned white, the evergreens turned white, and the path swept clean that morning was being filled in inch by inch.

The snow fell so earnestly, yet without sound. The whole building seemed muted by some hand, leaving only the heating coil of the ceramic stove inside, which gave a soft pop now and then.

The stove sat in the middle of the dining table, bought last winter, flat and low, with a clay pot on top. The pot held old white tea, its liquor already brewed to amber. Around the stove sat everyone: my wife peeling tangerines, my daughter setting out the board game she brought from school, my mother watching the pot, saying the flame is too small, then saying it is too big. Neither smaller nor larger pleased her. Her opinions about this stove exceeded what she once had about a coal stove.

My job was laying tangerine segments on the rack one by one. Heated, the peels beaded with fine oil, and the fragrance was a scorched fragrance, thicker than raw. My daughter grabbed first, burned her hand, shook it twice, and ate anyway.

The idle talk started from a piece of rice cake. Mother saw the cake and recalled her childhood New Year, when cake was steamed over the rice wok, sweet ones tossed with sugar, salty ones with soy sauce. Her little sister, greedy, swallowed a whole salty piece and choked, and the whole family thumped her back. From back-thumping, father remembered Old Zhou at his office, whose snoring was so loud the next office knocked on the wall. From Old Zhou, my wife remembered a dog at her grandmother's house that bowed to every visitor. The topics drifted on like this, not one sentence

useful, not one sentence worth stopping.

Outside, the snow turned the compound into another place. White covered the trash bins, the electric scooters, the hurried things of daytime. Frost flowers began growing on the glass, patch after patch, as if someone were planting ferns on the window. Our daughter suddenly said, look, the snow is lifting the street lamps higher. We looked. Sure enough, the snow piled under each lamp had raised it a span above the ground, and the light fell first onto snow, then onto people.

The pot boiled, its sound thin. Mother refilled everyone's cup; her own was full, so she held it without drinking. Father put down his newspaper and joined the table, telling how as a young man he walked twenty li to market in snow deep to his calves, water seeping into his boots, and at the destination he took off his boots and wrung out water. He said it in a flat tone, as if about someone else. My daughter and I both cried out, really? He added, I was fifteen that year, your age now.

Our daughter placed one stone on her board, then ran back to ask, Dad, were you cold then? Father thought a moment and said, feet cold, body hot, people walking to market sweated the whole way. She did not understand that answer, and I did not plan to explain. Some colds must be walked through to be understood.

At ten thirty the second rack of tangerines was gone, the tea faded to the color of rice water. My wife said tomorrow after the snow it would surely be colder. Mother said the snow must be swept tomorrow. Father said do not be late tomorrow. Tomorrow's business was cut off halfway by tonight, because the snow suddenly thickened, thick enough to see flakes slanting through the lamplight. The four of us lay side by side at the window watching, like four children.

Only in middle age do you slowly understand: what is precious in a stove fire is not the fire but all these people around it; what is precious in idle talk is not the words but that no sentence is racing anywhere. The big snow outside clears the world, the fire inside stores up time. What is stored tonight can be taken out on many busy, scrambled days ahead, to warm our hands.

Before bed I took one last look outside. The snow was still falling, the compound already completely white, like a sheet of paper with nothing written on it. The stove was off, its leftover heat still warm. The quilt is warm, and the dreams, probably, are white too.

www.vv99.net

老街的炭火盆

雪把老街封住的时候，老陈正趴在台子上修一只老座钟。他左手捏镊子，右手举着放大镜，屏住呼吸把一枚比米粒还小的齿轮归位。齿轮咬上的那一瞬，钟摆重新晃起来，他这才直起腰，朝窗外看了一眼。

窗外，雪正落在对面的屋檐上，落在街心的青石板上。整条街已经没什么人走了，只有卖烤红薯的老赵还守着他的炉子，雪落在他棉帽上，他也不掸。

铺子中间生着一只炭火盆。黄铜盆沿磨得发亮，盆里的炭烧到一半，红得像沉在水底的太阳。火盆上坐着一把铝壶，壶里的水从早响到晚。老陈的老伴周阿姨坐在火盆这头织毛衣，竹针碰着竹针，嗒，嗒，和墙上挂钟的摆声对得上。

儿子小满放学推门进来，带进一肩雪。他先把手伸到火盆上方，手心手背轮流烤，然后抓起火盆边煨着的两只红薯，一只递给周阿姨，一只自己捧着。他一边掰红薯一边讲学校的事：运动会报名，他们班没人报三千米，体育老师急了，说报了的免做一周值日，这才报了三个，全是想躲值日的。周阿姨笑得竹针都停了。老陈没抬头，但钟摆之间漏出一声笑。

雪越下越大。街对面邮局的台阶白成一整块，像新做的豆腐。老陈放下镊子，也坐到火盆边来。他把火钳插进炭灰里拨了拨，炭块翻了面，火光一下子亮起来，把三个人的脸都照亮了。周阿姨让他别拨太旺，费炭。老陈说明天封门，炭不炭的，先暖今晚。

小满问起那只老座钟是谁家的。老陈说，街口茶馆的，修了三十年，钟壳都让茶客们的胳膊肘磨出包浆了。周阿姨接话说，那钟比小满他爸的岁数都大。老陈说可不是，钟比他大，脾气也比他大，上弦晚了半分钟它就停，跟他妈年轻时一个样。这话周阿姨不接，只把织了一半的毛衣袖子在他眼前晃了晃，老陈立刻改口说钟还是比他好，钟不嫌他手笨。小满笑得直不起腰。

天黑透了，雪没有停的意思。老陈拉下铺子的半截门，把火盆往屋子中间又挪了挪。周阿姨从灶上端来三碗葱油面，面卧着荷包蛋，蛋边煎得焦脆。三个人围着火盆吃面，铺子里七八只钟各报各的点，错着半拍，倒也不乱。

小满吃罢面，从书包里掏出一张手工课做的纸雪橇，说放学要带同学滑，问爸爸明天雪会不会停。老陈朝窗外看了看，雪片在路灯下横着飞。他说，不停。周阿姨说，停。两个人都看着雪，谁也不服谁，像两个小孩。

夜里十一点，周阿姨收了毛线，小满被赶去睡觉。老陈最后给火盆压了一层灰，炭火在灰底下还红着，从灰缝里透出一线一线的光。他吹灭大灯，只剩火盆那一圈红和墙上钟摆的嗒、嗒。

第二天清早，雪停了。老街白得崭新，卖烤红薯的老赵的炉子上堆了半尺雪。老陈开门扫雪，扫到街心，看见小满那张纸雪橇被同学忘在雪地里，湿透了，摊成一张纸。他把它捡起来，带进铺子，压在火盆边的凳子上烘。纸角烘得翘起来的时候，钟正好敲八点，一声一声，落在满街的白上。

The Charcoal Basin on Old Street

When the snow sealed off the old street, Old Chen was bent over his bench repairing an old mantel clock. His left hand held tweezers, his right raised the magnifier, and he held his breath as he seated a gear smaller than a grain of rice. The instant the gear engaged and the pendulum began to swing again, he straightened up and glanced out of the window.

Outside, snow was landing on the eaves across the street, on the flagstones in the middle of the road. Almost nobody walked the street anymore, only Old Zhao the roasted sweet potato seller still guarding his oven, snow piling on his cotton cap, which he did not brush off.

In the middle of the shop stood a charcoal basin. Its brass rim was polished bright, and the charcoal inside, burned to its middle stage, glowed like a sun sunk under water. An aluminum kettle sat on the basin, its water singing from morning to night. Old Chen's wife Aunt Zhou sat on this side of the basin knitting, bamboo needle clicking bamboo needle, tap, tap, keeping time with the wall clock.

Their son Xiao-Man came in from school with a shoulder full of snow. He first held his hands over the basin, warming palm then back, then grabbed the two sweet potatoes warming at the basin's edge, handing one to Aunt Zhou and keeping one. Breaking his potato, he told school news: sign-ups for the sports meet, nobody in his class wanted the three thousand meters, the PE teacher got desperate and said sign up and skip class duty for a week, which finally got three entries, all wanting to dodge duty. Aunt Zhou laughed so hard her needles stopped. Old Chen did not look up, but between two swings of the pendulum a laugh leaked out.

The snow thickened. The post office steps across the street turned into one white block, like freshly made tofu. Old Chen set down his tweezers and joined them at the basin. He worked the poker through the ash and turned the coals over, and the fire brightened at once, lighting all three faces. Aunt Zhou told him not to stir it too hot, it wastes charcoal. Old Chen said tomorrow the shop stays shut, charcoal or not, tonight gets warm first.

Xiao-Man asked whose old clock it was. Old Chen said the street-corner teahouse's, repaired for thirty years, its case polished to a shine by decades of customers' elbows. Aunt Zhou picked it up, saying that clock is older than his father. Old Chen said indeed, older than him, and worse-tempered too: wind it half a minute late and it stops, just like his mother in her youth. Aunt Zhou did not take that, only waved the half-knitted sleeve in front of his eyes, and Old Chen quickly amended that the clock was still better than him, since the clock never called him clumsy. Xiao-Man doubled over.

Night came on fully, the snow showing no sign of stopping. Old Chen pulled down the half-door and moved the basin further into the room's center. Aunt Zhou brought three bowls of scallion-oil noodles from the stove, each with a poached egg, its edges fried crisp. The three ate around the basin while seven or eight clocks in the shop each struck their own hour, off by half a beat, yet somehow not chaotic.

After his noodles Xiao-Man took out a paper sled from his schoolbag, made in craft class, said he would sled with classmates after school, and asked his father whether the snow would stop tomorrow. Old Chen looked out, where flakes flew sideways through the lamplight. He said, no. Aunt Zhou said, yes. Both stared at the snow, neither yielding, like two children.

At eleven Aunt Zhou put away her knitting and Xiao-Man was herded to bed. Old Chen spread a last layer of ash over the basin; the coals stayed red beneath it, thin lines of light showing through the cracks. He blew out the big lamp, leaving only the ring of red from the basin and the clock's tap, tap on the wall.

Early next morning the snow stopped. The old street was newly white, and half a foot of snow had piled on Old Zhao's potato oven. Old Chen opened up and swept, and at the street's center found Xiao-Man's paper sled left behind by a classmate, soaked through, spread flat as paper. He picked it up, carried it into the shop, and set it on a stool by the basin to dry. When the paper corners curled up under the warmth, the clock struck eight, stroke after stroke, landing on the street's whole whiteness.

www.vv99.net