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.