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.

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