西瓜摊的小掌柜

我爱吃西瓜，因为我爸爸在街口看一个西瓜摊。别人吃瓜是买，我吃瓜是守着整座瓜山，近水楼台。

星期六，爸爸让我当一天小掌柜。早上卸完车，瓜山码好了：一层一层，每个都穿着绿衣裳，深绿浅绿的条纹从瓜蒂一路画到瓜脐。爸爸教我挑瓜先看相。瓜形要周正，不能一头大一头小；纹路要清晰，条纹越散开说明瓜越长足；瓜脐那个小圈圈，凹进去的比凸出来的甜。我蹲在瓜堆前挨个看过去，看熟了眼力，看哪个瓜都觉得它肚子里是红是生。

看相还不够，爸爸拍瓜给我听。他手掌一抬，啪啪啪，声音脆生生的，像拍熟透的鼓面。他又挑一个拍，闷闷的，他说那是生瓜，摆回去。我接过一个拍，力道不对，声音不脆也不闷，爸爸笑我手太轻，像拍棉花。我换了手掌根，用腕子发力，这回嘭嘭嘭，成了！我举着瓜给爸爸看，他点头，说可以出师一半。

验瓜要开一刀。爸爸按住一个瓜，刀口直直切下去，咔，瓜裂成两半，红瓤黑籽，瓤沙得能看到一粒一粒的边，汁水立刻涌上刀面。爸爸把开出来的半个递给围观的阿姨尝，阿姨咬一口说甜，当场挑走两个。我闻着那一刀开出来的味道，清甜清甜的，直冲鼻子，比家里冰过的瓜味更冲，那是现开的味道。

中午人少，爸爸切了块瓜给我。刚开的沙瓤，还带着太阳的温度，不冰，可甜得更直白，一口下去舌头整个被甜味包住，籽都懒得吐。我三两口吃完一块，汁水顺着手肘流，下巴亮晶晶。爸爸递毛巾，说小掌柜的工钱就是每天一块瓜，我嫌少，他说明天两块，我立刻同意。

傍晚收摊，剩下三四个瓜。爸爸开了一个我们俩分。夕阳照着瓜摊，照着红瓤，也照着他胳膊上被瓜皮蹭破的一道口子。他吃瓜吃得快，白边都啃了，说种瓜人惜瓜。

回家的三轮车上，我抱着最后一块瓜，边走边吃。街口那个瓜山空了，明天还会再堆起来。我爱吃西瓜，别人家的孩子等夏天，我守着夏天。要问我西瓜到底多甜，我说，比我当小掌柜那天，爸爸多给我的那一块还甜。

Little Keeper of the Melon Stand

I love watermelon, because my father keeps a melon stand on our street corner. Other children buy melons; I eat them while guarding a whole mountain of them, living right beside the water.

On Saturday, Father let me be the little keeper of the stand for one day. After the morning unloading, the melon mountain was stacked: layer after layer, each melon in its green coat, dark and light stripes drawn from stem to navel. Father taught me that choosing a melon begins with reading its face. The shape must be even, never fat at one end and thin at the other. The stripes must be clear, and the wider they spread, the more fully the melon has grown. The little circle at the melon navel, if it sinks in, is sweeter than one that sticks out. I crouched before the melon hill

and studied them one by one, and my eye grew sharp. Every melon I looked at, I could guess whether its belly was red or green.

Reading faces is not enough. Father knocked a melon for me to hear. His palm rose and fell, pat pat pat, a crisp sound like striking a ripe drum skin. He knocked another one, dull and heavy. That one is unripe, he said, put it back. I took one and knocked. My force was wrong, the sound neither crisp nor dull. Father laughed that my hands were too light, like patting cotton. I moved to the heel of my palm and drove the wrist. This time it went boom boom boom. Done. I held the melon up for Father to see, and he nodded, saying I was half a graduate.

To test a melon, one cut is needed. Father held a melon down, and the knife went straight in. With a crack the melon opened into halves: red flesh, black seeds, the flesh so sandy you could see each grain edge, juice rising on the blade at once. Father handed the opened half to an auntie standing around to taste. She bit, said sweet, and picked two melons on the spot. I breathed in the smell from that single cut, a clear sweetness shooting up my nose, stronger than melons chilled at home. That is the smell of a melon opened on the moment.

At noon the crowd thinned, and Father cut me a piece. Fresh sandy flesh still carrying the warmth of the sun, not iced, yet its sweetness spoke even plainer. One bite wrapped my whole tongue in sweetness, and I could not be bothered to spit the seeds. I finished the piece in three bites, juice running down to my elbow, my chin shining. Father handed me a towel and said the wage of a little keeper is one piece of melon a day. I called it too little. He said two tomorrow, and I agreed at once.

At dusk we closed the stand, with three or four melons left. Father opened one for the two of us. The setting sun lit the stand, lit the red flesh, and lit the scrape on his arm where melon rind had rubbed the skin. He ate fast and gnawed even the white rim, saying melon growers respect the melon.

On the tricycle home, I hugged the last piece of melon and ate as we rode. The melon mountain at the corner stood empty; tomorrow it will be stacked again. I love watermelon. Other children wait for summer; I stand guard over it. If you ask just how sweet a watermelon is, I say sweeter than the extra piece Father gave me that day as my keeper bonus.