果盘里的来路

大巴在十点拐进山沟里的果园，周雨辰趴在车窗上看呆了。苹果树一排一排站得整齐，果子压得枝条往下弯，红的一片、黄的一片。班主任说今天秋游的任务是摘苹果，一人摘满一筐。园主老隋迎出来，手掌宽得像蒲扇，他先给全班演示：一手托果，一手捏蒂，往上一送再一旋。他说摘果跟摘脾气不一样，手重了，果子当时不哭，三天以后它自己烂给你看。

周雨辰头一回知道苹果要这样摘。她托着一颗红苹果，捏着蒂，手上用了三分劲，果子稳稳落进掌心，果蒂留在枝上，一点伤都没有。她越摘越慢，越摘越轻，把筐里的果子一个个码平。同组的男生图快，把果子扔进筐，老隋走过去，捡起一颗带擦痕的，没批评，只说这颗他留下自己吃，剩下的都进城。男生们后来都学着轻拿轻放。中午收工，全班摘了四十多筐，果园空地上堆成一座小山。

下午返校前，老隋在果园口的棚子里打包寄往城里的苹果。纸箱里有一个个纸托，每颗苹果单独躺一格，箱口封三层胶带。老隋一边封箱一边跟帮工的家长说，这批走快递，两天到，颠不坏。周雨辰帮他把一箱箱搬到快递三轮上，箱角上盖着红戳：本周现摘。她想起自己摘的那筐里也有几颗会被这样装进纸托，心里忽然有点骄傲。

一周后的晚上，周雨辰家楼下快递站打来电话。她父亲搬上来一箱，开箱，纸托里一颗颗苹果躺得整整齐齐，箱底压着一张字条，是老隋托人捎的：秋游那帮娃娃摘的，挑了几颗顶好的寄来。母亲把苹果擦净，摆进餐边柜上的白瓷果盘。周雨辰看着果盘，从抽屉里翻出一块干净纱布，垫在果盘底下。她母亲笑她讲究，她说这是老隋教的，果子要垫着。那几天她吃苹果都挑自己秋游摘过的那种红富士，咬一口，脆甜里带着一点山风的味道。她开始明白，一颗苹果从树上到果盘，中间是那么多双手。浪费它，就是辜负那些手。

The Road Inside the Fruit Dish

The bus turned into the mountain orchard at ten in the morning, and Zhou Yuchen pressed her face to the window, stunned. Apple trees stood row after row in good order, their branches bending down under the weight of fruit, patches of red, patches of yellow. The head teacher said today's field trip task was picking apples, one full basket each. The orchard owner, Old Sui, came out to meet them, his palm wide as a palm-leaf fan. He demonstrated for the whole class first: one hand supports the fruit, one hand pinches the stem, lift it up and give a twist. Picking fruit, he said, is nothing like plucking a temper. If your hand is heavy, the fruit will not cry at the time; three days later it will rot on its own and show you.

It was Zhou Yuchen's first time learning that apples must be picked this way. She supported a red apple, pinched the stem, used three-tenths of her strength, and the fruit settled steadily into her palm, the stem left on the branch without a scratch. She picked slower and slower, gentler and gentler, leveling the fruit in her basket one by one. The boys in her group hurried and tossed apples into the basket. Old Sui walked over, picked up one with a scuff mark, criticized no one, and simply said he

would keep this one for himself and everything else would go to the city. After that the boys all learned to handle them gently. At noon the picking ended. The class had filled more than forty baskets, piled into a small mountain in the open ground of the orchard.

Before the bus left in the afternoon, Old Sui was packing apples for the city in the shed at the orchard gate. Inside each carton sat paper cradles, every apple lying in its own compartment, and the box seams were taped three times. Sealing boxes, he told the parents who were helping: this batch goes by courier, two days, it will not get bruised. Zhou Yuchen helped him carry carton after carton onto the courier's tricycle. The box corners bore a red stamp: freshly picked this week. She remembered that among the apples in her own basket, a few would be packed into paper cradles like this, and a small pride rose in her heart.

One week later in the evening, the courier station downstairs called. Her father carried a carton up. He opened it, and apples lay in neat rows in their paper cradles. Under them was a note Old Sui had asked someone to deliver: picked by those field-trip children; we chose the best few and sent them to you. Her mother wiped the apples clean and arranged them in the white porcelain fruit dish on the sideboard. Zhou Yuchen looked at the dish, then dug out a clean gauze cloth from the drawer and laid it under the dish. Her mother laughed at her fussiness. She said Old Sui taught her that fruit needs padding. For days afterward, whenever she ate an apple she chose the Fuji kind she had picked on the trip, and one bite gave a crisp sweetness with a taste of mountain wind in it. She began to understand that between a tree and a fruit dish stand so many hands. To waste the fruit is to betray those hands.

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