外婆院里的桃

七岁那年暑假，爸妈把我送到乡下外婆家。院子当中立着一棵桃树，树干是歪的，树皮裂开一道道口子，渗出琥珀色的胶。外婆说，这棵树比妈妈的年纪还大。

清明刚过，外婆搬来竹梯，让我递报纸和细铁丝。她把报纸裁成巴掌大的方块，一个个套在青桃上，用铁丝拧住袋口。我问为什么给桃穿衣服。她说，虫子咬，鸟啄，套上袋子，虫子进不去，鸟也认不出那是桃。我仰着头看满树的小纸袋，风一吹哗啦哗啦响，像树在鼓掌。

等桃的日子漫长。我每隔两天就扒着袋子看一角，里面的桃还是青的，硬得像石子。外婆笑我，桃没熟，急也没用，太阳一天一天晒，它自己就甜了。

头一个熟桃是在六月底发现的。纸袋被风掀开一角，露出的皮白里透红，像抹了一层淡胭脂。整颗桃子还带着绒毛，凑近了闻，有一股清甜的香，不浓，得仔细才捉得住。外婆把它摘下来，在井水里浸了浸，递给我。

我咬下第一口，汁水顺着手腕往下淌，滴在脚背上。果肉软，靠近核的地方带一点酸，核上粘着细细的红绒毛。外婆把树上最大的一颗留给我，自己吃小一些的。邻居王奶奶送来自家包的粽子，外婆转头摘了半篮子桃回礼，还叮嘱人家放两天再吃，硬的不好吃。

傍晚，外婆在树下铺开旧床单，坐在小马扎上摇蒲扇。蝉在头顶叫，桃子的香气混在晚风里，时不时有一颗熟透的桃落地，闷闷的一声。

七月末，外婆开始做桃子罐头。她给桃削皮、掰成两半去掉核，加冰糖慢慢煮，装进洗干净的旧玻璃瓶，倒扣过来放凉。一整个夏天，就这样从青桃装进了熟桃，又从熟桃装进了罐头。

后来我回城上学，离那个院子越来越远，也吃过许多桃子，超市里摆得整整齐齐，个个一般大。可我总觉得，最好吃的一颗始终留在记忆里——被井水镇过，被太阳晒过，有人特意留给我的那种甜。

The Peach Tree in Grandmother's Yard

The summer I turned seven, my parents left me at my grandmother's house in the village. A peach tree stood in the middle of the yard, its trunk leaning, its bark split into seams that oozed amber gum. Grandmother said the tree was older than my mother.

Just after Qingming, she set up a bamboo ladder and had me pass her newspaper squares and thin wire. She cut the paper into palm-sized pieces and slipped one over each green peach, twisting the wire shut. I asked why the peaches needed clothes. Insects bite, birds peck, she said; inside a bag the insects cannot reach them and the birds no longer recognize them as peaches. I looked up at the tree full of little paper bags, rustling in the wind like applause.

The waiting was long. Every other day I peeked into a bag, but the peach inside

stayed green and hard as a stone. Grandmother laughed at me. An unripe peach cannot be hurried, she said; the sun ripens it one day at a time.

The first ripe peach was found at the end of June. The wind had lifted the corner of a bag, showing skin white blushed with red, like faint rouge. The whole fruit was fuzzy, and close to the nose it gave off a clean sweet scent, so light you had to hunt for it. Grandmother picked it, dipped it in well water, and handed it to me.

My first bite sent juice running down my wrist and dripping onto my feet. The flesh was soft, a little sour near the stone, and the stone wore a coat of fine red fuzz. Grandmother always kept the biggest peach on the tree for me and ate the smaller ones herself. Neighbor Grandma Wang brought over zongzi she had wrapped, and Grandmother answered with half a basket of peaches, telling her to wait two days before eating, that hard peaches taste like nothing.

In the evenings Grandmother spread an old sheet under the tree and sat on a small stool fanning herself. Cicadas sang overhead, the smell of peaches drifted in the night wind, and now and then a fully ripe peach fell to the ground with a soft thud.

At the end of July Grandmother began making peach preserves. She peeled the peaches, broke them in half to remove the stones, simmered them slowly with rock sugar, poured them into washed old glass jars, and turned the jars upside down to cool. The whole summer was packed away this way, from green peaches into ripe ones, and from ripe ones into jars.

Later I went back to the city for school and grew farther from that yard. I have eaten many peaches since, lined up neatly in supermarkets, all the same size. Still, the best one has stayed in my memory, cooled in well water, warmed by the sun, and the kind of sweet someone saved on purpose for me.