菜市场东口的瓜摊

老周的水瓜摊摆在菜市场东口，一辆三轮车，车斗里垫着旧棉被，瓜就躺在棉被上。每天下午四点，他拿一把小刀，靠瓜皮的颜色挑瓜：皮色发乌、纹路撑开的熟，皮色发亮、纹路挤得紧的还生。他拍一下，侧着耳朵听，听个闷响才放进秤。

放学路过的小学生林小满，是摊上的常客。她不买整个，只买切开的零块，五毛钱一块。老周切瓜有讲究，先削掉一圈白皮，再顺着纹路切成月牙，红瓤上黑籽排得整整齐齐。他把瓜递过来时总说一句，闻闻，生瓜我收回去。

林小满接过瓜，先不看，先闻。一股清冽的甜气从瓤上冒出来，混着点青草味。她咬一口，沙瓤在舌头上散开，甜里带着一点点凉，汁水从嘴角漏出来，滴在校服袖口上。她一边嚼一边往家走，走到巷口，手里只剩一片发白的瓜皮。

林小满曾跟着老周学过一手。老周让她抱来一个瓜，教她看瓜肚上那块黄斑，黄得深的是在地里晒足了日子的；再让她把瓜翻过来看瓜脐，脐眼收得小、四周光滑的，皮薄。她照着挑了一个，拍起来砰砰响，像敲一面小鼓。老周说，这个行，切开尝尝。瓜一刀下去自己裂开，红瓤绷得紧紧的，甜气一下子涌出来，围观的人都点头。那回老周没收钱，只说，学的。

有一年夏天，瓜摊迟迟不来。第四天傍晚终于来了，老周却只卸下几个小瓜。他蹲在车边，给人挑瓜的手有点抖。后来大人们小声说，瓜地淹了，大半的瓜烂在地里，这几个是高处抢收的。

那天收摊，老周把最后一个瓜切成八块，摆在车斗边上，谁路过都递一块。林小满也接了一块。那个瓜不算甜，瓤有点面，老周自己先咬了一口，咂咂嘴说，凑合，水大。他还是把最大那块塞给了林小满。

开学以后，林小满在作文里写秋天的水果，写的是苹果和橘子。可一到夏天，她还是四点十分放学，绕到菜市场东口。老周的瓜摊还在那儿，棉被旧了一层，他挑瓜还是先看皮色，再拍，再听。

林小满举起一块瓜闻了闻，清冽的甜气扑上来。她咬下去，汁水又滴在校服袖口上。她想，明年夏天，这里应该还会有瓜。

The Melon Stand at the East Gate

Old Zhou's watermelon stand sat at the east gate of the market, one tricycle with an old quilt padded in the bed of the cart, the melons lying on the quilt. Every afternoon at four he took a small knife and chose melons by the color of their rind: dull skin with the stripes stretched open meant ripe, shiny skin with the stripes packed tight meant still green. He gave one a pat, tilted his ear to it, and only weighed out the ones that answered with a hollow thud.

Lin Xiaoman, a schoolchild who passed on her way home, was a regular. She never bought a whole melon, only cut pieces, five cents each. Old Zhou cut with ceremony:

first he pared off a ring of white rind, then sliced along the stripes into crescents, black seeds set in neat rows across the red flesh. Handing the piece over he always said the same line, smell it first; if it is underripe I take it back.

Lin Xiaoman took the melon and smelled before looking. A clean cold sweetness rose off the flesh with a hint of grass. One bite, and the sandy flesh broke apart on her tongue, sweet with a thread of cool in it, juice escaping at the corner of her mouth onto the cuff of her school uniform. She walked home chewing, and by the mouth of the lane all she held was a rind gone white.

Lin Xiaoman once learned a trick or two from Old Zhou. He had her hug a melon up and taught her to read the yellow patch on its belly, the deep yellow meaning long days of sun in the field; then to turn it over and look at the navel, a small closed navel ringed by smooth skin meaning a thin rind. She picked one by the book and patted it, and it sounded like a little drum. Old Zhou said, this one will do, cut it open. One stroke of the knife and the melon split itself, the red flesh stretched tight, sweetness surging out, and everyone watching nodded. That time Old Zhou took no money and said only, tuition.

One summer the stand was late. It finally came on the fourth evening, but Old Zhou unloaded only a few small melons. He squatted by the cart, and his hand trembled a little as he picked them out for people. The grown-ups said in low voices that the melon field had flooded, most of the melons rotted in the water, and these few had been rescued from the high ground.

That day at closing time Old Zhou cut the last melon into eight pieces and set them on the edge of the cart, offering a piece to anyone who passed. Lin Xiaoman took one too. That melon was not very sweet, its flesh a little mealy. Old Zhou bit one himself, smacked his lips and said, passable, mostly water. He still pushed the biggest piece into Lin Xiaoman's hands.

After school started, Lin Xiaoman wrote a composition about autumn fruit and filled it with apples and tangerines. But when summer came she still got out of class at four ten and detoured to the east gate of the market. Old Zhou's stand was still there, the quilt one shade older, and he still chose melons by looking at the rind first, then patting, then listening.

Lin Xiaoman held up a piece and smelled it, the clean cold sweetness rising to her face. She bit in, and the juice dropped onto her cuff again. Next summer, she thought, there should be melons here again.

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