城里的纸箱里躺着故乡的霜

快递站打电话来的时候，我正加班。取回来一看，是个笨重的纸箱，胶带缠了四道，面单上邻居大哥的名字，后面是他媳妇的村名。箱子里码着二十来斤柿饼，每个都用食品袋单独装了，箱底压着一截树枝，枝上几片叶子干透了还是绿的。我认得那叶子，是老柿树的叶子。我们村东头那棵，少说一百二十年，我小时候在它底下玩过泥巴。

晚上打电话过去，大哥在电话那头说，今年霜降日子准，村里组织集中摘柿子，老柿树上的果子归集体，各家自留树的自己摘。他和媳妇霜降那天五点上树，他在梯子上递，她在底下接，一筐一筐过秤。摘回来捂了两天，削皮挂绳，就在自家院里晒。他说如今晒场不集中了，各家晒各家的，可规矩没改，翻饼的日子、装缸的日子，老一辈说啥时候就啥时候。我媳妇在边上插话，说大哥特意留了老柿树顶上的果子晒的饼，让我尝尝，跟往年一个味不。

我在城里第八年。城里的超市也卖柿饼，摆在恒温柜里，形状周正，甜得规规矩矩。可大哥寄的这批不一样，个头不匀，有的还带着削皮刀走过的棱，白霜厚得指腹一蹭就沾一层。我捏一个咬开，霜先凉，糖心慢慢淌出来，那个甜是带着节气的，带着霜降清晨梯子上那口冷气，带着晒场上日日翻动的手。我在出租屋的窗前站着吃完一个，窗外是高架桥的车灯，窗内是故乡的晒场。

后来我把箱底那截带叶的树枝插在阳台的空花盆里，不浇水也不指望它活，就是让它站着。同事看见，问是什么。我说是我们村的柿子树，霜降那天全村人都在它底下抬头。同事不懂，我也不多解释。人离了故乡，总要靠一点实在的东西把节气认回来。一箱柿饼，一截枯枝，就是我每年冬天在城里过霜降的办法。故乡回不去的时候，它就跟着柿子，一层白霜一层白霜地，寄到我嘴里。

The Frost of My Hometown Lies in a Cardboard Box in the City

The courier called while I was working late. The box came back heavy, taped four times round, with the name of a neighbor from my old village on the label. Inside were twenty jin of persimmon cakes, each in its own food bag, and pressed at the bottom a cut branch with a few dried leaves still green. I knew those leaves. They came from the old persimmon tree at the east end of our village, well over a hundred years old, the tree under which I played with mud as a child.

That night I called. My neighbor said the frost date fell right this year, and the village organized a joint picking on Frost Descent. Fruit from the old tree went to the collective; each family picked from its own trees. He and his wife were up before five, he passing down baskets, she catching them below, each basket weighed at the roadside. The fruit was sweated two days, then peeled, strung on rope, and dried in their own yard. The rules had not changed, he said. The elders still set the days for turning the cakes and packing the jars.

This is my eighth year in the city. Supermarkets here sell persimmon cakes in climate-controlled cases, perfectly shaped, politely sweet. The batch in my box is different. The cakes are uneven, some still showing ridges left by the peeling knife, their white frost thick enough to stick to a fingertip. I bit into one. The frost came cool first, then the soft center slowly ran out, a sweetness that carried the season in it, the cold breath on the ladder at dawn on Frost Descent, the hands that turned the cakes day after day in the drying yard.

I planted the leafy branch in an empty pot on the balcony, watered it nothing, hoping for nothing, just letting it stand. A coworker asked what it was. I said it was from the persimmon tree in our village, the one the whole village looked up at on Frost Descent. He did not understand, and I did not explain more. When a person leaves home, he needs some solid thing to recognize the seasons by. A box of persimmon cakes and a dry branch are how I spend Frost Descent in the city. When I cannot go back, home comes with the fruit, frost layer by frost layer, into my mouth.

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