老柿树挂满了霜

故乡院后有一棵老柿树，据说比我爷爷的年纪还大。树干粗得两个孩子手拉手围不住，树皮裂成一块一块，像老人手背上的筋。它一年里大半时候不起眼，叶子厚，颜色暗，站在院后像个沉默的长辈。只有到了秋天末，叶子落干净，柿子全挂出来，满树红，才有人想起它。村里人说，那棵树是替我们家看着老屋的。

霜降前后是摘柿子的日子。头天夜里落了霜，第二天清早父亲就搬梯子，梯子靠在树上，他一级一级上去，脚踩的地方要避开细枝。我们在树下递筐，母亲把摘下来的柿子按软硬分两堆：软的留家里当季吃，硬的削皮晒饼。父亲在树上偶尔停一下，挑一个最红的扔下来，那是给我的。柿子落到衣襟上，软的会磕破一点皮，母亲说破皮的先吃，不许放。我在树下仰着头，看霜化的水从父亲袖口滴下来，那画面我记了近三十年。

晒柿饼是母亲的事。硬柿子削皮，留一层薄皮，一个一个挂在屋檐下的绳上，绳从这头拉到那头，像挂了一排小灯笼。晒要晒足日子，白天太阳收水，夜里霜再压一压，柿皮慢慢皱下去，颜色从橘红熬成深褐。等柿子上泛出一层白霜，母亲说那是柿子自己出的糖，不是外面的灰。她把柿饼装进缸，撒一层干叶子，压在窗台底下，能吃到过年后。家里来客人，她拿几个摆盘，客人咬一口说甜，她站在旁边笑，不说这缸柿饼晒了多少个晴天。

我在城里的超市见过一切水果，车厘子、牛油果、包装精致的柿子，一颗一颗躺在塑料盒里。可我嘴里的柿子不是那样的。我嘴里的柿子在树上，要仰头看；在梯子上，要父亲踩上去；在屋檐下，要母亲晒一整个冬天。前年回村，老屋翻新，老柿树还在，只是没人爬了，柿子熟透了挂在枝头，落一地。邻居说现在谁还晒柿饼，超市里都有。我站在树下捡了几个没烂的，擦擦咬一口，还是那个味。树还替我们看着老屋，只是看的人换了一茬又一茬。

The Old Persimmon Tree Heavy with Frost

Behind the old family yard in my hometown stands an old persimmon tree, said to be older than my grandfather. Its trunk is so thick two children holding hands cannot circle it, and its bark splits into pieces like the tendons on the hand of an old man. Most of the year it is unremarkable, leaves thick, color dark, standing behind the yard like a silent elder. Only at the end of autumn, when the leaves have all fallen and every persimmon hangs out, red all over the tree, does anyone remember it. Villagers say that tree stands watch over our old house.

Picking days come around the Frost Descent. Frost falls the night before, and at dawn my father carries the ladder out, leans it on the tree, and climbs rung by rung, his feet avoiding the thin branches. We pass baskets up under the tree, and my mother sorts the picked fruit into two piles by softness: the soft ones stay for the season, the hard ones get peeled and dried into cakes. My father pauses now and then up there and drops down the reddest one, the one for me. The fruit lands in the fold of my

clothes; a soft one bruises a little skin, and my mother says the bruised ones get eaten first, no keeping. I stand under the tree with my head back, watching the melted frost drip from the cuffs of my father, a picture I have kept for nearly thirty years.

Drying persimmon cakes belongs to my mother. The hard fruit gets peeled with one thin skin left, then hung one by one on a rope under the eaves, the rope running from one end to the other like a row of small lanterns. Drying takes its full days: the sun takes the water by day, the frost presses again by night, the skins slowly wrinkle, the color stewing from orange red to deep brown. When a white frost blooms on the cakes, my mother says that is sugar made by the fruit itself, not dust from outside. She packs the cakes into a jar with a layer of dry leaves and sets it under the windowsill, enough to eat past the new year. When guests come she plates a few, they bite and say sweet, and she stands beside smiling, never mentioning how many clear days that jar cost her.

In city supermarkets I have seen every fruit, cherries, avocados, persimmons packed neatly one by one in plastic boxes. But the persimmon in my mouth is not that one. The persimmon in my mouth is on the tree, to be looked up at; on the ladder, for my father to climb; under the eaves, for my mother to dry through a whole winter. The year before last I went back and the old house had been renovated, the old tree still there, only nobody climbs it now, the fruit ripe and hanging, fallen all over the ground. A neighbor says who dries persimmon cakes anymore, the supermarket has them. I picked up a few unspoiled ones under the tree, wiped them, bit in, and it was still that taste. The tree still stands watch over the old house; only the watchers change, one after another.

柿饼上的白霜是时间结的

奶奶活着的时候说过一句我记到今天的话：柿子要等霜。她说柿子是认节气的果子，霜没落过，咬一口涩嘴；霜落过了，涩气自己就退了。小时候我不信，霜降前后从老柿树上摘回来的柿子，我偷着捏一个软的吃，涩得直伸舌头。奶奶不笑我，只说等一等，再等一等。她的一辈子好像都在等一等里过，等霜降，等柿子红，等柿饼上那层白霜。

故乡晒柿饼有晒场的规矩。柿子是霜降那天起摘的，摘下来堆在堂屋墙角，捂两天，挑硬实无损的削皮。削皮用一把小刀，转着圈削，皮要连不断，削好的柿子串在麻绳上，一条绳串十几个，挂在晒场的木架子上。头几天要日日翻，把背阴的一面翻过来见日头。奶奶的手在绳子间翻动，快而不乱，像在做一件极熟的事。晒场边就是那棵老柿树，叶子落尽了，枝头最后几个柿子红着，奶奶说那是留给鸟的，人不摘。

约莫二十来天，柿饼出了白霜。奶奶把柿饼收进缸里，一层柿饼一层干叶，封好，再拿出来见风，白霜越出越厚。她那天最高兴，捏起一个给我看，说这不是霉，是柿子自己出的糖，是时间结的糖。我不懂时间怎么会结糖，只觉得那白霜甜得和别处不一样，舔一口，凉，然后慢慢回甜。

后来我离了家，在城里见过包装精致的柿饼，盒子上印着产地和等级，却没有白霜出得那样厚的。有一年冬天母亲寄来一罐，开盖一看，霜白得像落了雪。我捏起一个，忽然想起晒场，想起麻绳，想起老柿树梢上留给鸟的那几个红柿子。奶奶走了六年了，晒场拆了盖了偏房。可我每年冬天剥开一只柿饼，都在那层白霜里认得她——她说过的话没有错，时间真的会结糖，一层一层，结在会认它的人舌尖上。

The White Frost on Persimmon Cakes Is Made by Time

Grandmother had a saying I still keep: persimmons must wait for frost. She said the fruit knew the seasons. If frost had not fallen, one bite would pucker your mouth; after frost, the astringence left on its own. As a child I did not believe her. I pinched a soft persimmon from the pile brought down from the old tree and puckered my tongue. She did not laugh, only said wait, wait a little longer.

Drying persimmons in my hometown had its rules. They were picked from the day of Frost Descent, piled in the corner of the main room for two days, then the firm and unbroken ones were peeled. She peeled with a small knife, turning as she cut, so the skin came off in one unbroken strip. The peeled fruit went onto hemp rope, a dozen to a line, hung on racks in the drying yard. For the first days they were turned every day so the shaded side saw the sun. Beside the yard stood the old persimmon tree, its leaves gone, the last few fruits red on the top branches. Grandmother left those for the birds.

After some twenty days the white frost appeared. She packed the cakes into a jar, a layer of fruit, a layer of dry leaves, then took them out to the wind until the frost grew thick. On such days she was happiest. She held one up and said this was no mold, it was sugar made by the fruit itself, sugar tied by time. I did not know how time could make sugar, but the frost tasted sweet in a way nothing else did, cool at first, then slowly sweet.

I left home years ago. In the city I have seen persimmon cakes in fine boxes, printed with origin and grade, yet none wore so thick a frost. One winter my mother sent me a jar. I opened it and the frost was white as snow. Holding one up, I thought of the drying yard, the hemp rope, the red fruits left for the birds. Grandmother has been gone six years, and the yard is gone too. But every winter, peeling a persimmon cake, I know her in that white layer. Her words were true: time does make sugar,

layer by layer, on the tongue of those who can recognize it.

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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