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.

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