卖瓜人的夏天

老周凌晨四点就醒了。瓜在地头过秤，他一辆三轮往回拉，六趟，麻袋蒙顶，怕日头把瓜晒伤。到巷口时天刚亮，他把瓜一个个码上车厢，垫好旧地毯，摆正纸板。纸板上的字是老伴写的，本地沙瓤不甜不要钱，毛笔字，边角被雨水泡软了。

上午的日头一天比一天硬。他躲在伞底下打盹，手里那把蒲扇搁在肚子上，一起一伏，像是扇子自己在摇。偶尔有早买菜的人停下来，他睁开眼，扇子一放，拍瓜，听声，一刀下去，红瓤亮出来，买主点头，掏钱，他递过去，说声回见。

傍晚才是他的时候。他把灯泡拉亮，吆喝声起来：西瓜，沙瓤的西瓜。这一嗓子他喊了十一个夏天，从巷头喊到巷尾，连巷口小卖部的收音机都听熟了，他一开腔，收音机就把音量拧小。熟客不用挑，他看人下刀：给老人挑沙瓤，甜软；给年轻人挑脆沙，爽口；给小孩留瓜心，最甜的那一块他切下来递过去，小孩嘴角沾着籽，他看着笑。

有一年夏天雨多，瓜卖不动，老周把车停在巷口三天，天天把瓜翻一遍个儿，怕闷坏。第四天出了日头，他吆喝得比哪天都响，那天的瓜格外甜，街坊都说雨后的瓜养住了。他嘴上应着，心里记着另一笔账：瓜经不起等，人经不起闲，吆喝一停，一个夏天就过去了。

收摊前，裂口的瓜留不住，他就切成块摆在车沿上，谁路过谁拿一块。蒲扇的老人、跳完舞的阿姨、放学的孩子，一人一块，站在灯底下吃完，说今年的瓜甜。老周应着，手里蒲扇摇起来，赶蚊子，也赶一天剩下的热气。

卡车开走时街已经安静了。他盘算着明天进什么瓜，盘算着再过半个月瓜就少了。蒲扇搁回肚子上，夏天还长，他的吆喝还得再喊许多个傍晚。

The Summer of a Watermelon Seller

Old Zhou woke at four in the morning. The melons were weighed in the field, and he hauled them back by tricycle, six loads, covered with gunny sacks against the sun. By the time he reached the alley mouth the sky was just brightening. He stacked the melons one by one into the bed, padded the old carpet, and set the cardboard sign straight. The characters on the sign were written by his wife with a brush: local sandy-flesh melons, no charge if not sweet, and the corners had gone soft in the rain.

The morning sun grew harder day by day. He dozed under the umbrella, that palm-leaf fan of his resting on his belly, rising and falling as if the fan were waving itself. Now and then an early shopper stopped, and he opened his eyes, set the fan down, tapped a melon, listened, and with one stroke of the knife the red flesh shone out. The buyer nodded, paid, and he handed it over with a see you next time.

Evening was his hour. He pulled the bulb lit, and his cry rose: watermelon, sandy-flesh watermelon. He had shouted this voice for eleven summers, from one end of

the alley to the other, until even the radio at the corner shop knew it by heart: the moment he started, the radio turned itself down. Regulars did not need to pick; he cut according to the person. For old people he chose sandy pulp, sweet and soft; for the young, crisp and sandy; for children he kept the heart of the melon, the sweetest piece, cut out and handed over while seeds stuck to their mouths, and he watched and smiled.

One rainy summer the melons would not sell, and Old Zhou parked the cart at the alley mouth for three days, turning every melon end over end each day for fear of the damp. On the fourth day the sun came out, and he shouted louder than on any day. The melons that day were sweeter than usual, and the neighbors all said rain-fed melons hold their sugar. He agreed out loud while keeping another account in his heart: melons cannot wait, and a seller cannot idle; once the cry stops, a summer is gone.

Before closing, melons that had split could not be kept, so he cut them into pieces on the bed rail, and whoever passed by took a piece. The old men with fans, the aunties back from dancing, the children out of school, one piece each, eaten standing under the light, saying this year the melons are sweet. Old Zhou answered yes, his palm fan waving, shooing mosquitoes and shooing the last heat of the day.

When the truck drove off the street was quiet. He figured out what melons to buy tomorrow, and figured that in half a month the melons would start to run low. The fan went back onto his belly. The summer is still long, and his cry has many more evenings to go.

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