冬天的橘子

入冬的第一批橘子上市，我在菜场挑了十斤。摊主问够不够吃，我说够，一家人围着炉子，一冬就着话吃完。这话脱口而出，说完自己愣了一下，原来吃橘子在我这里，从来不是一个人的事。

小时候的冬天是从剥橘子开始的。母亲把橘子放在棉袄袖子里焐，放学回家她掏出一个，还带着体温。我剥皮，指甲掐进橘蒂，一圈剥开，皮雾像白汽一样喷出来，呛得打个喷嚏。母亲说慢点，皮别扔，晒干了过年泡水。我把皮掰成花瓣状，摆在窗台上一排排晒着，比橘子本身还像风景。

橘子上的白丝，归祖母管。她吃橘子极慢，剥完皮还要把白丝一条条撕净，说留着上火。我嫌她麻烦，她笑笑，把撕下来的络堆在小碟里，说这东西药铺里也卖。那时我不懂，长大后才明白，一个人肯为一瓣橘子花这些工夫，是把日子当回事。

围炉是冬夜的正经节目。父亲生一只小煤炉，坐上水壶，橘子搁在炉沿上烤。烤过的橘子皮香得发甜，满屋子都是。一人一瓣地传着吃，话也一瓣一瓣地传。父亲讲他年轻时的事，母亲插嘴纠正，我负责添煤。炉火映着三个人的脸，橘子不酸，冬天也不觉得长。

如今我在城里也有了自己的炉子，电的，干净，可惜没有煤烟味。女儿吃橘子学我小时候的样子，把皮掰成花瓣摆着，只是不晒，说留着做手工。她不吃橘络，我学着祖母的样子替她一条条撕，撕到一半自己笑了，当年嫌麻烦的人，如今嫌得心甘情愿。

前几日回老家，母亲八十多了，还在棉袄袖子里给我焐橘子。我剥开，白雾还是那个白雾，呛出的喷嚏还是那个喷嚏。橘子从童年滚到白头，一路都是剥皮的手、撕络的手、递到嘴边的手。冬天再冷，只要炉子还温着，橘子还一人一瓣地传，这个家就还是那个家。

The Tangerines of Winter

The first tangerines of winter arrive at the market, and I buy ten jin. The seller asks if that is enough for the season. I say yes, a family around the stove, eating them through winter one talk at a time. The words come out of me without thinking, and I pause afterward, surprised to find that eating tangerines has never been a one-person business for me.

Winter in childhood began with peeling a tangerine. My mother kept them warm inside the sleeve of her padded coat, and when I came home from school she took one out, still holding the heat of her body. I peeled mine, my nail digging into the stem, opening the skin in one unbroken spiral, a mist from the peel puffing out like white steam and setting me to sneezing. My mother said slow down, do not throw the peels away, dry them for New Year water. I broke the peels into flower shapes and lined them on the windowsill to sun, a row of scenery more beautiful than the fruit itself.

The white threads on a tangerine belonged to my grandmother. She ate them very slowly, tearing off every pale thread before eating, saying the threads caused heat in the body. I found it a fuss. She only smiled, piled the torn threads on a small dish, and said the medicine shop even sold them. I did not understand then. Grown up, I know now that a person willing to spend such care on one segment of tangerine is taking life seriously.

Around the stove was the proper show of a winter night. My father lit a small coal stove and set the kettle on it, tangerines roasting on the rim. Roasted peel smells sweet, and the whole house filled with it. We ate one segment at a time, passing them around, and the talk passed the same way. Father told stories of his youth, mother interrupted to correct him, I was in charge of feeding coal. The stove light shone on three faces, the tangerines were not sour, and winter did not feel long.

Now I have a stove of my own in the city, electric and clean, sadly without the smell of coal smoke. My daughter peels tangerines the way I did, breaking the peels into flower shapes and laying them out, except she does not dry them; she says she will use them for crafts. She does not eat the white threads, so I learn the patience of my grandmother and tear them off for her, one by one, and halfway through I laugh at myself. The one who once found it a fuss now does the fussing gladly.

The other day I went home. My mother, past eighty, was still warming a tangerine for me inside her coat sleeve. I peeled it; the mist was the same mist, the sneeze it brought was the same sneeze. The tangerine has rolled from my childhood to white hair, all the way a hand peeling, a hand tearing threads, a hand passing to a mouth. Winter can be as cold as it likes; as long as the stove is still warm and the tangerines still pass one segment at a time, this home is still that home.