炉边的一瓣橘子

巷子东头的老周，入冬必生炉子。炉子一坐水，整条巷子的孩子都闻得见，放学书包一撂就往他门口聚。不为别的，为他那炉沿上烤着的橘子。

老周分橘子有规矩：一人一瓣，自己剥。孩子接了橘子学他剥，指甲从橘蒂转一圈，皮雾喷出来，有个女孩打了个喷嚏，满屋子人笑。老周不笑，说橘子皮别丢，教孩子把皮掰成四瓣，摊在窗台上晒，说晒干了泡水消食。孩子们照做，晒了一排，像给冬天镶了圈金边。

他挑橘子还挑橘络。别个嫌白丝麻烦，他偏让孩子把白丝撕下来收着，说这叫橘络，晒干了是药材。有个小子偷懒，把带络的橘子直接塞嘴里，老周也不恼，让他尝尝络的味道，苦的。小子咂咂嘴，回头老老实实回来撕。孩子们在他炉边学会的头一门手艺，就是把一瓣橘子吃干净。

炉边的夜晚长。老周话不多，孩子讲学校的事他听着，偶尔插一句。有一年冬天，一个父母都在外地上学的男孩天天来，老周不多问，橘子照分，炉子照生。男孩长大后来谢他，他只说那年他一个人剥橘子冷清，多个人热闹。这话传遍巷子，各家大人听了都记着，第二年冬天，炉边的孩子更多了。

我搬离巷子那年也是冬天，炉子还坐着水。老周塞给我一兜橘子，说路上剥着吃，皮吐干净别弄一车。车开出去很远，我剥一个，白雾喷出，呛得眼都湿了。巷子里的炉火、晒着的橘皮、撕得整整齐齐的橘络，都跟着那口喷嚏回到了身上。

前年回去，老周的炉子换成了电暖炉，烤橘子的味道淡了些，规矩没变：一人一瓣，自己剥，络撕净。他的孙子替他把络收进小布袋，说要寄给上大学的姐姐。我站在炉边，忽然明白这条巷子这些年靠什么暖着——靠的不是炉子，是那一瓣一瓣传下去的规矩，和规矩里不肯说破的心。

A Segment of Tangerine by the Stove

Old Zhou at the east end of the lane lit his stove every winter without fail. The moment the kettle sat on it, every child in the lane could smell it, and after school they dropped their schoolbags and gathered at his door. Not for anything else, but for the tangerines roasting on the rim of his stove.

Old Zhou had rules for sharing tangerines: one segment each, and you peel your own. The children took a tangerine and learned to peel like him, nail circling from the stem, the peel mist puffing out. One girl sneezed and the whole room laughed. Old Zhou did not laugh. He said do not throw the peels, and taught the children to break them into four petals and spread them on the windowsill to dry, saying dried peel steeped in water helps digestion. The children obeyed and lined them up to dry, as if fitting the winter with a golden border.

He was particular about the white threads too. Others found them a nuisance; he made the children tear them off and save them, saying these are the tangerine threads, dried they are medicine. One boy got lazy and popped a thread-covered

segment straight into his mouth. Old Zhou did not scold him; he let him taste the thread, which was bitter. The boy smacked his lips and came back obediently to tear them off properly. The first craft the children learned by his stove was to eat a segment of tangerine clean.

The nights by the stove were long. Old Zhou was not talkative; he listened while the children told school stories and put in a word now and then. One winter a boy whose parents worked in another city came every day. Old Zhou asked nothing, shared the tangerines as always, and lit the stove as always. Years later the grown man came to thank him, and Old Zhou only said that year he had been lonely peeling tangerines alone, and more people made it lively. The words spread through the lane, the grown-ups each remembered, and the next winter there were more children by the stove.

The year I moved away from the lane was also a winter, and the stove still had a kettle on it. Old Zhou pressed a bag of tangerines into my hands and said peel them on the road and keep the peels tidy, do not litter the bus. Long after the bus pulled out, I peeled one, the mist sprayed up, and my eyes went wet from the sting. The stove fire of the lane, the peels drying on sills, the threads torn neat and saved, all came back to me riding on that sneeze.

The year before last I went back. Old Zhou had switched to an electric heater, and the taste of roasted peel was thinner, but the rules had not changed: one segment each, peel your own, tear the threads clean. His grandson gathered the threads into a small cloth bag for him, saying he would mail them to his sister at university. Standing by the stove I suddenly understood what had kept this lane warm all these years. It was not the stove. It was the rules passed along one segment at a time, and the hearts inside those rules that no one ever said out loud.

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