葡萄架下的九十九串

大巴一拐进葡萄园的门，车窗里就炸开了。棚架一眼望不到头，一根根铁丝上挂满了葡萄，紫的压着青的，一串比一串沉，把铁丝压成一道道弯。老师喊别急，先排队进园，眼睛先看，剪刀后动。

我们钻到架子底下，头顶全是葡萄，像倒挂的紫色铃铛。太阳从架缝里漏下来，一格一格的光落在地上。园主老赵叔发剪刀，一人一把，又叮嘱：剪的时候一手托住串底，葡萄沉，光剪不托，落地就摔成泥。我抬头相串，相中一串紫得发黑的，粒粒挨得紧，像一家人挤在一块儿取暖。

我举起剪刀，卡住藤梗，一握，没剪动。换个大口子，再握，咔，梗断了，手早就伸在下面托着，那串稳稳落进我掌心，沉得我手腕一坠。串上的白霜被我掌心的汗蹭掉一小片，露出底下的紫，亮得发乌。我举着它倒退两步，想给同桌看，后腰撞上架子的立柱，头顶哗啦一声，别人家的葡萄洒了我一脖子。

再剪第二串，我贪大，专挑最沉的下剪。剪刀咬住粗梗，我使劲，串在半空晃，底下托的手没接正，啪，一串砸在地上，紫的青的滚了一地，溅起点泥星。老赵叔过来，没恼，蹲下捡了两粒完好的递给我：摔了的进桶堆肥，没摔的还能吃，尝尝，自家园子不亏待嘴。我接过来，那颗在衣角蹭都没蹭，直接塞进嘴里，牙一磕，皮破了，汁水又甜又凉，从舌尖一路凉到嗓子眼。我眯起眼，一个字都没说出来。

后来我学乖了，剪中等个儿的，一手剪一手托，一串一串往篮里放。篮子渐渐冒尖，紫的堆成小山。收工过秤，我们班的篮子排第一，九十九串。老赵叔把剪刀收回去，说下年还来。全班齐声喊来，声音把棚架上的叶子都震得动了。

回大巴的路上，我嘴里还留着那颗葡萄的甜。手上被剪刀柄磨出两道红印，掌心沾着白霜蹭掉的紫。我靠着车窗数，数着数着睡着了，梦里棚架低低的，一伸手，哪串都是我的。

Ninety-Nine Bunches Under the Trellis

The moment the bus turned through the gate of the grape orchard, the windows erupted. Trellises stretched beyond sight, every wire hung with grapes, purple pressing on green, each bunch heavier than the last, bending the wires into arcs. Our teacher shouted, hold on, line up to enter, eyes look first, scissors move later.

We ducked under the trellis. Grapes hung overhead like purple bells upside down. The sun leaked through the gaps in frames, falling on the ground in squares of light. The orchard owner, Uncle Zhao, handed out scissors, one per person, and warned: when you cut, cradle the bottom of the bunch with one hand. Grapes are heavy. Cut without cradling and they shatter into mud on the ground. I looked up and chose a bunch so purple it was nearly black, its berries packed tight, a family huddling for warmth.

I raised the scissors, caught the stem, squeezed. It did not cut. I switched to the wider notch, squeezed again, click, the stem gave, and my hand was already below, and the bunch dropped steady into my palm, so heavy my wrist dipped. The pale bloom on the skin rubbed off where my sweaty palm touched it, showing the purple beneath, dark and shining. I held it up and backed two steps to show my desk mate, and my lower back hit a support post with a crash, and somebody else's grapes rained down my neck.

For the second bunch I got greedy and went for the heaviest. The scissors bit the thick stem, I strained, the bunch swung in the air, the cradling hand got under it wrong, and smack, a whole bunch hit the ground, purple and green rolling everywhere, spattering mud. Uncle Zhao came over, not angry, squatted, picked up two unharmed berries and handed them to me: the fallen ones go to the compost barrel, the unharmed ones are still good, taste one, our orchard does not cheat the mouth. I took them without wiping them on my sleeve and popped one in my mouth. My teeth broke the skin, and the juice was sweet and cold, cool all the way from tongue to throat. I squinted and said nothing at all.

After that I learned sense and cut the medium ones, scissors in one hand, cradling with the other, bunch after bunch into the basket. The basket mounded over, purple piled into a little hill. At the weigh-in our class basket came first, ninety-nine bunches. Uncle Zhao collected the scissors and said, come again next year. The whole class shouted yes in one voice, and the sound shook the leaves on the trellis.

On the bus home, the sweetness of that one grape still stayed in my mouth. The scissor handles had pressed two red lines into my hands, and my palms were stained purple where the bloom had rubbed off. I leaned on the window counting, fell asleep mid-count, and in the dream the trellis hung low, and whichever bunch I reached for was mine.

爷爷的葡萄园开了门

放暑假第二天，爸爸骑摩托带我回老家。车还没停稳，爷爷就站在院门口笑，身后那扇通往葡萄园的小门开着，像早就在等我。

爷爷的葡萄园不大，三十几架葡萄排成两行，架子低得伸手就能够到。进了园，先看的不是地上的路，而是头顶。一串串葡萄挂在架子上，紫的像攒了一冬天的话，终于要说出口；青白的还硬着，贴着叶子打盹。阳光从叶缝里漏下来，落在地上变成一块一块的光斑，风一吹，光斑就挪位置，像谁在数地上的果子。

爷爷递给我一把剪刀，教我把串托在左手心，剪刀贴着果梗剪，手不能松，松了串散了，果

子会哭。我学着剪第一串，手抖，剪了两刀才断。那串紫得发黑，果粉完整，像蒙着一层薄薄的霜。爷爷接过去，没放进筐，反而举起来对着光看了看，说这串留种，明年嫁接就靠它。我心里一紧，赶紧又去剪第二串，想再剪一串配得上它的。

剪到第五六串，我坐下架下的石凳歇气。旁边一颗葡萄熟得发亮，掉在裂开的砖缝里。我捡起来，在衣角上蹭了蹭，塞进嘴里。果皮一咬就破，汁水又甜又凉，顺着指缝往下流。正闭眼享受，爷爷在架子那头喊：偷吃也不叫上我。我脸一红，举着剩下半串给他送过去。他尝了一颗，眯着眼说，今年这架最甜，就是给你留的。

回家那天，我把剪下的头一串用报纸托着，放在车窗座上，一路没敢靠椅背，怕压着。到家把它供在窗台上，谁也不许动。妈妈笑我，把葡萄当奖杯。我说，这本来就是奖杯，是爷爷的园发给我的。

后来每次路过水果摊，我都忍不住看葡萄的果梗剪得齐不齐。剪得齐的，我就想起爷爷的剪刀贴着果梗那一下，想起他说，手不能松，松了串散了。我觉得这话不只是说葡萄的。

Grandpa Orchard Opened Its Gate

On the second day of summer vacation, my father took me back to the countryside on his motorbike. Before the engine stopped, Grandpa was already standing at the gate, smiling, with the little door to his grape orchard open behind him, as if it had been waiting for me all along.

The orchard was not large. Three dozen vines were trained in two rows on low trellises, low enough to touch with a raised hand. When you entered, the first thing to look at was not the path but the sky above. Clusters hung from the trellis: purple ones like words kept all winter, finally ready to be spoken; pale green ones still hard, dozing against the leaves. Sunlight leaked through the gaps in the leaves and fell in patches on the ground. When the wind blew, the patches shifted, like someone counting the fruit.

Grandpa handed me the scissors. Rest the cluster in your left palm, he said, cut close to the stem, and do not loosen your hand. If the hand loosens, the cluster scatters, and the berries will cry. My first cut trembled; it took two snips to get through. The cluster was purple almost to black, its bloom intact, as if dusted with thin frost. Grandpa took it, held it up to the light, and announced that this one would be kept for seed stock, for next year grafting. My heart tightened, and I hurried to cut a second, hoping for one worthy of standing beside it.

By the fifth or sixth cluster I sat down on the stone bench under the trellis to rest. A single grape, ripe and shining, had fallen into a crack in the brick. I picked it up, rubbed it on my sleeve, and put it in my mouth. The skin burst at the

first bite, the juice sweet and cold, running down between my fingers. Eyes closed in delight, I heard Grandpa call from the far end of the rows: Sneaking snacks without inviting me. My face went red, and I carried the half cluster over to him. He tasted one, eyes narrowing, and said this row was the sweetest of the year, saved just for you.

The day we left, I carried the first cluster home on a bed of newspaper, propped on the seat beside the window, afraid to lean back and crush it. I placed it on the windowsill at home, and no one was allowed to touch it. My mother laughed at me for treating grapes like a trophy. It is a trophy, I said, issued to me by Grandpa orchard.

Ever since, whenever I pass a fruit stall, I cannot help checking whether the stems of the grapes are cut neatly. When they are, I remember the moment of Grandpa scissors close to the stem, and his words: do not loosen your hand, or the cluster scatters. I think he was not only talking about grapes.

架上最后那串葡萄

采摘节结束的时候，园主老周站在门口数筐。九十七筐，一筐不落。游客们把架子上的葡萄剪得干干净净，连最小的散串都没放过。只有最东头那架还挂着一串，青一块紫一块，像没睡醒的脸。老周抬头看了一眼，没剪。晚熟的果子，得等。

那串葡萄是怎么被看见的，得从采摘节那天说起。早上八点园门一开，人流涌进去，先挤到中间那几架——那里的葡萄最紫，紫得理直气壮。孩子们举着剪刀够不着，就由大人托着剪。剪刀咔咔响，一串串葡萄落进筐里，筐满了就提到门口过秤。阳光、喊声、果香，整个园子像一锅烧开的水。那串晚熟的挂在东头最高处，没人挤过去，它就一直挂着，看人们进进出出。

第三天傍晚，园子快关门了，来了个背书包的女孩。她站在门口问，还有葡萄吗。老周往东头指了指。她进了园，中间那几架空了，光秃秃的藤条像说完了话的嘴。她一路找到东头，仰头看见那串葡萄，眼睛一下子亮了。

老周搬来梯子，她爬上去，左手托住串，右手贴梗下剪。一串葡萄的重量落在掌心里，比她想的沉。她小心翼翼顺着梯子下来，像端一碗满出来的水。

她没有过秤，站在架子底下先摘了一颗放进嘴里。青的那颗还酸，她皱了下鼻子；再摘一颗紫透的，甜味在舌头上化开，她笑了，说：等了三天，就该是这个味儿。老周在门口听见，收了她的钱，多塞给她一张果园的门票，说秋天再来。

后来那架葡萄落了叶，藤条埋进土里过冬。谁也不知道第二年它会不会结得更多。但女孩记住了一个道理：抢着摘的果子未必最甜，留在架上最后被剪下的那一串，有它自己的时间。

The Last Cluster on the Vine

When the picking festival ended, the orchard owner Old Zhou stood at the gate counting baskets. Ninety-seven baskets, not one left behind. The visitors had cut every cluster from the trellises, even the small loose ones. Only one cluster remained at the far east end, half green half purple, like a face not yet awake from sleep. Old Zhou glanced up at it and did not cut. Late-ripening fruit, he said, has to wait.

How that cluster was finally seen begins on festival day. At eight in the morning the gate opened and the crowd poured in, heading first for the middle rows where the grapes were purplest, purple with full confidence. Children reached with scissors and could not touch them, so adults lifted them up to cut. Snip after snip, clusters dropped into baskets, and full baskets were carried to the gate to be weighed. Sunlight, shouting, the smell of fruit: the whole orchard was like a pot of water come to the boil. The late cluster hung highest at the east end. No one pushed that way, so it simply hung there, watching people come and go.

On the third evening, just before closing, a girl with a schoolbag came to the gate and asked whether there were any grapes left. Old Zhou pointed east. She walked through rows now bare, the empty vines like mouths that had finished speaking. She found the east-end trellis, looked up, saw the cluster, and her eyes lit all at once.

Old Zhou brought the ladder. She climbed, cradled the cluster in her left palm, and pressed the shears to the stem with her right. The weight of a grape cluster landed in her hand, heavier than she expected. She came down the ladder carefully, like carrying a bowl filled to the brim.

She did not go to the scale first. Standing under the trellis, she picked one berry and put it in her mouth. The green one was still sour, and her nose wrinkled. Then she picked one fully purple, and the sweetness melted on her tongue. She laughed and said: three days of waiting, and this is exactly the taste it should be. Old Zhou heard her from the gate, took her money, and slipped in an extra ticket for autumn, saying come back then.

Later the vine dropped its leaves and its branches were buried for winter. No one knew if it would bear more the next year. But the girl carried away one lesson: the fruit picked first is not always the sweetest. The last cluster cut from the vine keeps its own time.