母亲腌的柚子皮

秋天的柚子在南方人家从不空着手离开。果肉吃完，皮也绝不肯进垃圾桶——母亲会把四瓣的大皮摞起来，压在门后的缸盖上，说还有用。小时候我对此深不以为然：皮有什么好吃？别人的皮是垃圾，我家的皮是待用。

摘柚子那天全家出动。树不高，父亲托我，我骑在他肩上，双手抱住果子拧。柚子沉，摘下来得两个人接力往下传，从树上传到屋顶上，再递到母亲手里，母亲在墙根接，接住就往怀里拢，像接一个新生儿。那年的柚子格外多，缸摞满了皮，母亲又拿绳子把皮串起来挂在屋檐下，一串串黄澄澄的，邻居路过说，你家在晒灯笼。

腌柚子皮是道工序，母亲做得郑重。皮要先泡，每天换水，泡足三天，把苦气逼出去；再切细丝，焯水，挤干，拌上白糖和麦芽糖，上锅小火熬。熬的时候人不能走开，糖汁起了小泡要搅，搅慢了糊锅。我在灶口添柴，母亲在锅前搅，糖香混着柚皮的清苦从锅里漫出来，整个灶间都甜了。熬好装进罐子，倒扣过来晾凉，罐口那一圈糖渍像给罐子描了边。

起初我是嫌弃它的。同学吃橘子糖，我家吃柚子皮，咬起来筋筋的，甜里总藏着一线苦。母亲不劝，只自己吃，早起含一片配粥。转折在离家那年。我在异乡的冬天感冒，喉咙干痛，翻行李翻出那罐母亲塞进箱底的柚子皮。含一片在嘴里，那股熟悉的清苦漫上来，苦后回甜，我的眼泪毫无道理地下来了。原来我嫌弃了二十年的味道，被母亲提前腌好了，一路带在我身边。

如今我也学着腌。泡水的第三天，我会捏起一根皮丝尝尝，苦味淡了，就轮到糖上场。我这才敢承认：母亲这一辈子就是柚子皮的配方，苦是要去掉的，去不掉的，就用糖慢慢熬着。去年回家，屋檐下没再挂柚子皮，缸也空着。我把一罐自己腌的放在她手里，她尝了一片，点头，说熬得可以。她不知道，我熬一锅的时候，搅的是记忆。

The Pomelo Peel Mother Preserved

In southern households, autumn pomelos never leave empty-handed. Once the flesh is eaten, the rind certainly does not go into the trash. Mother would stack the four big sections of peel and press them under the lid of the jar behind the door, saying they still had use. As a child I strongly disapproved: what is good about peel? Other people’s peel is garbage; ours is material in waiting.

The whole family turned out on picking day. The tree was not tall. Father lifted me and I straddled his shoulders, arms wrapped around the fruit, twisting. Pomelos are heavy, so a picked one passed down by relay: from the branches to the roof, then into Mother’s hands at the foot of the wall. She caught it and gathered it to her chest, like receiving a newborn. That year the crop was unusually heavy. The jar overflowed with rinds, so Mother threaded more onto string and hung them under the eaves, strand after strand of golden yellow. A neighbor passing by said: your family is drying lanterns.

Preserving pomelo peel is a craft, and Mother treated it with ceremony. The rind must soak first, water changed daily, a full three days to drive out the bitterness; then it is sliced into fine shreds, blanched, squeezed dry, tossed with white sugar and malt sugar, and simmered in the wok over low heat. No one may walk away while it cooks. When the syrup raises tiny bubbles, it must be stirred; stir too slowly and the bottom scorches. I fed firewood at the mouth of the stove while Mother stirred at the wok. The sweetness of sugar mixed with the clean bitterness of pomelo peel spread out of the pot, and the whole kitchen turned sweet. Done, it went into jars, turned upside down to cool, the ring of sugar candied around the mouth like a drawn border.

At first I disdained it. Classmates ate tangerine candy; my family ate pomelo peel, chewy in the teeth, with a thread of bitterness always hiding inside the sweetness. Mother did not argue. She simply ate it herself, letting a piece dissolve over morning porridge. The turn came the year I left home. In a foreign city one winter I caught a cold, my throat raw, and rummaging through my bag I found the jar Mother had tucked into the bottom of my suitcase. I let a piece sit in my mouth. That familiar clean bitterness rose, and after the bitterness came the sweetness, and my tears fell for no reason at all. So the flavor I had disdained for twenty years had been preserved in advance by Mother, carried along at my side the whole way.

Now I too am learning to preserve. On the third day of soaking, I pinch up a shred and taste it: when the bitterness fades, it is sugar’s turn to enter. Only now do I dare admit it: Mother’s whole life followed the pomelo-peel recipe. Bitterness is meant to be removed; what cannot be removed is slowly simmered with sugar. Last year when I went home, no pomelo peel hung under the eaves, and the jar stood empty. I placed a jar of my own preserving into her hands. She tasted a piece, nodded, and said the simmering was good. She does not know that as I stirred the pot, what I stirred was memory.

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