老屋的柚子树又结果了

父亲在电话里说，院子里的柚子树结果了，结得沉，压得枝条去够地面。他说这话时语气平常，像在通报一件迟到的旧事。可我握着手机站在写字楼的窗边，楼下是车流，我却满鼻子都是那股清苦的香气。

那棵树比我记事还老。树干粗，皮裂成一块一块，像老人手背。夏天它在院里撑开一大片荫，母亲在树下摆竹床，我睡在荫里，阳光从叶缝筛下来，落在脸上碎成铜钱大小。柚子成熟是在秋末，青黄的果子挂满枝头，风一过，整棵树都在轻轻晃，像攒了一树的心事要说。树下纳凉的日子结束了，柚子把秋天正式交到了人手里。

摘柚子要上梯子。父亲把竹梯靠在树上，踩上去，人高出树冠半头。他一手扶枝，一手拧果子，手腕一转，柚子就落进下面张开的布袋里。我在树下拽着袋角，看他在梯子上挪动，影子投在地上，比人长得多。他摘得慢，每个都要托起来看一看，歪的、有虫眼的留下自己吃，周正的留待送人。有一年他失手滑了一个，柚子砸在草地上滚出老远，我们全家追着跑，像追一个逃逸的月亮。

分食柚子是在晚饭后。最大的那个摆在桌子正中，父亲用刀在顶上划一个十字，四只手顺着把皮往下掰，白汽腾起来，满屋都是那股又苦又清的香。瓤衣要剥掉，母亲剥得仔细，一瓣一瓣码在盘里。柚子是微酸的，带一点苦，小孩舌头挑剔，往往嫌它不如橘子甜。可一家人围着桌子，一瓣接一瓣地吃，谁也不说话，只有剥皮的声音。那时我不懂，如今才懂：那种安静就是好日子的声音。

我在城里买的柚子皮薄肉甜，反倒吃不出那个味道。今年霜降后，我学着父亲的样子，在顶上划十字，四瓣掰开，白汽腾起的一瞬，我忽然站住了。原来有些味道是指针，一拨就回到旧年的院子。我给父亲回电话，说明年柚子红了，我回去，梯子我扶。

The Old House Pomelo Tree Bore Fruit Again

Father said on the phone that the pomelo tree in the courtyard bore fruit again, heavy fruit, bending the branches down toward the ground. He said it in an ordinary tone, like reporting an old piece of news running late. But I stood holding the phone at the window of an office tower, traffic flowing below, and my nostrils were full of that clean bitter fragrance.

The tree is older than my memory. Its trunk is thick, its bark cracked into patches like an old man’s knuckles. In summer it spread a great shade over the yard. Mother set the bamboo bed under it, and I slept in the shade while sunlight sifted through the leaf gaps and landed on my face, broken into copper-coin pieces. Pomelos ripen at late autumn: green-gold fruit hung on every branch, and when wind passed, the whole tree swayed gently, as if it had gathered a season’s worth of thoughts to say. The days of resting under the tree ended; the pomelos formally handed autumn over to human hands.

Picking pomelos requires a ladder. Father leaned the bamboo ladder against the trunk and climbed until his head rose half a head above the canopy. One hand on a branch, the other twisting the fruit, a turn of the wrist, and the pomelo dropped into the cloth bag spread open below. I held the corner of the bag at the foot of the tree, watching him shift along the ladder, his shadow stretched on the ground, far longer than the man. He picked slowly, lifting each fruit to inspect it: crooked ones and insect-nicked ones kept for the family, well-shaped ones saved for gifts. One year he slipped and dropped one. The pomelo struck the grass and rolled far off, and the whole family chased after it like chasing an escaped moon.

Sharing the pomelo happened after dinner. The largest one sat in the center of the table. Father scored a cross on its top with the knife, and four hands peeled the rind downward together. A white mist rose, and the whole room filled with that fragrance, bitter and clean at once. The pith must be stripped; Mother did it meticulously, segment by segment, stacking them on a plate. Pomelo is faintly sour with a touch of bitterness. Children’s tongues are fussy and often find it less sweet than tangerines. But the family sat around the table eating segment after segment, no one speaking, only the sound of peeling. I did not understand then. I understand now: that silence was the sound of good days.

The pomelos I buy in the city have thin rinds and sweet flesh, yet somehow taste of nothing. After this year’s Frost Descent, I imitated Father, scored a cross on top, pulled the rind open in four sections, and in the instant the white mist rose, I suddenly stood still. So some flavors are compass needles: touch them and you are back in the courtyard of old years. I called Father back and said: next year when the pomelos redden, I am coming home. I will hold the ladder.