割稻比赛

九月底，村里的稻子全熟了，田头一直黄到天边。村长拿树枝在田里画了条线，八户人家各占一头，割稻比赛就算开了张。我爸在里头，我的差事是送水和喊加油。村长一声开始，镰刀在地里亮成一片，唰、唰，稻子一排排倒下，声音像雨落在屋顶上。

我跑到田埂上看我爸割稻。他的镰刀抡圆了，一把稻子齐刷刷倒下，他头都不抬。他旁边是老张叔，瘦瘦矮矮，手脚却快，两个人扯了个平手。田埂上的人喊得嗓子都劈了。我怕踩坏稻茬，踮着脚沿埂跑，攥着衣角喊爸快点，喊到嗓子冒烟。

比赛有规矩：割倒的稻子要码成人字形靠在埂边，乱堆的罚重割。我爸码稻子也整齐，一把一把靠得匀匀的。我数着我们那一行的稻把子，一、二、三，数到二十几就乱了，索性改成喊加油。

日头爬到头顶，比赛歇晌。我从家里拎来大暖壶，两只手各提一只，一路打晃地跑到田头。壶里是绿豆汤，倒进杯底沉着一层豆沙。叔伯们蹲在地边咕咚咕咚灌，喝完抹嘴，说我送的水比去年家的甜。我爸喝得最快，嘴角挂着几滴汤，手背一擦，又下了地。

第二轮开赛，我爸的镰刀像长了翅膀，慢慢压过老张叔半头。老张叔不恼，还喊：慌什么，稻茬留高了，回头你收不完。地里的人都笑。笑声混着镰刀声，田野比赶集还热闹。

日头偏西，比赛收场，我爸赢了半行。村长没有奖品，抱了抱拳，说明年给赢的人备一暖壶绿豆汤。众人又笑，说明年自己送水。

傍晚回家，我们沿田埂走，我爸肩上挑着稻子，我抱着镰刀和空暖壶。夕阳把影子拉得很长，新割的稻茬冒出青草味。村里的炊烟直直地升起来。我爸忽然说，今年谷子饱，冬天新米给你蒸年糕。我抱着暖壶嗯了一声，手上还全是绿豆汤的味道。

The Rice-Cutting Contest

At the end of September, the whole village’s rice was ripe, and the field heads lay golden all the way to the sky. The village head drew a line in the field with a stick, eight households each took one end, and the rice-cutting contest began. My father was in it, and my job was to carry water and cheer. At the village head’s shout of start, sickles flashed in the field, swish, swish, rice stalks fell row after row, the sound like rain on a roof.

I ran along the field ridge to watch my father. His sickle swung in a wide arc, a handful of rice fell at once, and he never raised his head. The man beside him was old Zhang Shu, thin and short but fast, and the two kept even. The people on the ridge shouted themselves hoarse. Afraid of trampling the stubble, I tiptoed along the ridge, clutching my hem, shouting Dad, go faster until my voice went hoarse.

The contest had rules: cut rice had to be propped into a leaning shape against

the ridge, and a messy pile meant cutting it over. My father stacked his bundles neatly too, each one leaning evenly. I counted the bundles in our row, one, two, three, lost count past twenty, and gave up and went back to cheering.

When the sun climbed overhead, the contest paused. I lugged the big thermos from home, one in each hand, staggering all the way to the field head. It was full of mung bean soup, and the poured cups had a layer of bean pulp at the bottom. The uncles squatted at the field edge and gulped, then smacked their lips and said my water was sweeter than last year's. My father drank fastest, wiped a few drops from his mouth with the back of his hand, and went back into the field.

The second round began. My father's sickle seemed to grow wings, and he slowly edged ahead of old Zhang Shu. Old Zhang Shu did not get angry; he shouted over: do not rush, you leave the stubble too high. Everyone in the field laughed. The laughter mixed with the sound of sickles, and the field was livelier than the market.

When the sun tilted west, the contest ended, and my father won by half a row. The village head had no prize but clasped his hands and promised a thermos of mung bean soup for next year's winner. Everyone laughed again, saying they would carry their own water next year.

On the dusk road home, we walked along the ridge, father carrying rice on his shoulder, me carrying the sickle and the empty thermos. The setting sun stretched our shadows long, and the fresh stubble gave off a green grassy smell. From the village chimneys, cooking smoke rose straight up. Father said suddenly: this year's grain is plump; when the new rice comes in winter, we will make you rice cakes. I hugged the thermos and said mm, my hands still smelling of mung bean soup.