Beginning of Winter



One evening you look up from the kitchen sink and see your own face in the window. A fortnight ago you could still see the wall across the yard. The change crept up while you were busy making supper.

Lidong, the nineteenth of China's twenty-four solar terms, offers a date for noticing a change like this. It falls in early November, when the Sun reaches 225 degrees on its apparent yearly path. The next term is Xiaoxue, Minor Snow, roughly a fortnight later. Both names belong to a calendar shaped by observations in the Yellow River region. Your own winter may arrive by quite different signs.

> *Keep one familiar place in mind as you read: a kitchen window, a front step, the bus stop after work. Over the next two weeks, look there again. Which part of the day has changed enough that you might live it a little differently?*

What people put by for winter



In the old quarters of Tianjin, one way of marking Lidong was to fold dumplings around a filling of winter squash. Think of the hands that a meal like that brings to the table: someone grating the squash, someone pinching the edges, a child trying to guess which dumpling is theirs. The squash filling is a recorded local custom. The family around this table is yours to imagine.

The word “winter” can suggest a landscape in which work has stopped. Yet agricultural accounts from southern China describe farmers using clear days around Lidong to harvest, dry and store late rice. Putting food by takes work. Rest at the table might come at the end of a particularly busy day in the field.

What keeping something means at home

You may have a smaller version of this work in your own kitchen. A bag of beans in the cupboard, labelled with the date you opened it. A list on the fridge of the three things you can make when you arrive home late. Ask someone who cooked for you as a child what they liked to have on hand when the weather turned. Write down the name they use for the dish, even if you make it differently now.

> *A note to keep: “My grandmother kept the squash under the bench. I remember the hollow sound when she knocked on the rind.”*

On Tianjin squash dumplings / Zhejiang Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences

On the late rice harvest / Beijing Municipal Forestry and Parks Bureau

Dress for the journey home

At noon you cross a square in shirtsleeves. At six you wait for the bus on the same paving stones, the buildings are in shadow, and your sleeves are damp from the rain. For a working day like that, the useful forecast is the one for the journey home.

Before you leave

Check the evening wind and rain as well as the afternoon temperature. A spare layer you can take off on a crowded train gives you more choice than a single heavy coat. If rain is likely, think about the part of the trip you cannot shorten, such as the walk from the platform. Put your rain shell where you can reach it before you step outside.

When the light goes early

Try your usual errand at lunchtime once this week. On the way back, notice where the path falls into shadow. If frost is possible, a shaded step can stay slick after the pavement in sunlight has cleared. Take the better-lit crossing for the evening trip. If you cycle, check the lights in daylight, while there is still time to charge them.

When November is warm or wet

In a mild coastal city, a place to dry shoes may matter more than a thicker coat. In the Southern Hemisphere an evening walk may be gaining light. Keep the Chinese calendar date and use your local conditions to choose the adjustment. Write down something precise enough to act on tomorrow, such as “Put the umbrella in the outside pocket before the afternoon shower.”



Cold, wind and layers / US National Weather Service

One meal for a dark evening



The squash in the Tianjin story suggests a simple supper. The pot below is a modern kitchen exercise. Choose an ingredient that is in season or already in your cupboard. There is no special food you need to eat on this date.

Squash and bean pot for two

Soften half a chopped onion in a spoonful of oil in a saucepan. Add two cups of peeled squash cut into small cubes and about two cups of vegetable stock or water. Cover and simmer gently until the squash crushes easily against the side of the pan. Stir in a drained can of cooked white beans. Add a splash more water if needed and heat until steaming. Mash a few pieces for a thicker broth; taste before adding salt.

Carrot or sweet potato works if that is what you have. Serve with bread or rice. In a warm kitchen, skip the stove and use cooked beans with chopped vegetables and a dressing you like. The part to carry forward is choosing one manageable meal before the busiest evening of the week.

> *For next time, note one detail a recipe cannot tell you: which pan fits this portion, who liked the softer pieces, or which ingredient you already had.*

Make the evening fit

Notice the first light you switch on when you come home. Is it where you need it? A pool of light over the chopping board may matter more than brightening the whole room. If you reach the stairs before you reach a switch, clear the landing while it is light and work out how to light the first step before using it.

Move one part of the day

If your usual walk ends in darkness now, try a shorter circuit during a daylight break. If the hours of your shift are fixed, use a part you can move: collect the parcel on the way in, set out the next day's clothes after supper, or call a friend for the stretch of the evening when you miss the walk together. If daylight is increasing where you live, you might take supper outside instead.

A permission slip for rest

A change of season does not clear a diary. Tonight, choose one task that can wait, give it a return time, and tell anyone else who depends on it. Be specific. "I will wash the pan after breakfast" is easier to live with than promising yourself a quiet winter.

FROM A JOURNAL · AN IMAGINED ENTRY

> *"At the sink I could only see the stripes of my shirt reflected back at me. I put my bowl under the table lamp and left the laptop shut. There were two messages I still owed. I wrote 'reply after breakfast' on a slip of paper. Halfway through dinner the phone buzzed. The note was there when I looked up, and I finished the meal sitting down."*

From Lidong to Minor Snow

Give one small adjustment a fair trial over this solar term. Three visits to the same place are enough. Choose a landmark that costs you no extra journey. A window you pass on a night shift works as well as a garden gate.

01 On your first visit

Note the hour and one plain detail before making a plan. “At 5:10 I could read the numbers on the bus stop but not the timetable” gives you something to compare. Choose one change, such as saving a copy of the timetable on your phone. Write it on the next page.

02 About a week later

Return at roughly the same point in your routine. Did the change solve the difficulty? Perhaps the saved timetable helped, but the real problem was rain on the screen. Try a paper copy or a different place to wait. Note what failed as readily as what helped.

03 As the next term begins

Look back before you turn to Minor Snow. There may have been no frost or snow at all. What detail would let a friend picture these particular two weeks where you live? Keep one useful change, or cross it out if life has already moved on.

> *In one household the cupboard gained a can of beans; in another, a raincoat found a new hook beside the door. Both make a good last line for a Lidong entry.*

Calendar reference / Hong Kong Observatory, The 24 Solar Terms

Cultural background / UNESCO, The Twenty-Four Solar Terms

My Lidong fortnight

Write a few words each time you visit. Leave the later boxes open until you return.

Date, place and time of day

First visit / What did I notice?

What will I change at home or on the way there?

My permission slip / What can wait, and until when?

Second visit / What worked or needed adjusting?

Before Minor Snow / Which detail or habit will I keep?