八百米跑道上的小跛马

元旦前班里报运动会八百米，没人举手，体育老师问我敢不敢。我的头摇得很快。去年我报过一次，跑到第二圈嗓子发腥，腿灌了铅，在全班面前走了最后一段，从那以后，八百米这三个字我一听就耳朵热。

星期六全家去看动画电影，银幕上是一群雪谷里的矮马，跑接力。领头安排错了，把一条后腿有点跛的小跛马排进了最长的一段。小跛马站在风口，耳朵压得平平的。它跑起来一瘸一拐，雪雾里别的马一个个超过它，它的风声却一直没停。最险的一段是冰桥，它的一条腿卡进冰缝，我以为它会停下等救援，它把腿拔出来，换了个姿势，驮着布包继续跑。影厅里有人小声说：它又没跑第一。我听见这话，心里却咚咚地响——它跑完了。

灯亮起来的时候，我在座位上想了很久。去年我走最后一段的时候，全班是什么表情？我记得自己不敢抬头，却好像听见有人说：她走完了也算厉害。那时我把这句话当成了可怜，现在想起来，那也许是真的。小跛马也没跑第一，可雪谷里的马都记得它驮着布包过冰桥的样子。

星期一我找到体育老师，说我要重新报八百米。老师挑了下眉毛，在名单上写下我的名字。那几天我放学后绕操场走圈，走到第二圈就喘，喘完接着走。妈妈在单杠那边择菜，头也不抬，只在我经过时说：今天比昨天多走了半圈。

比赛那天风很大。枪响之后我落在最后，第一圈还行，第二圈嗓子开始发腥——就是去年那个味道。腿想停，我听见看台上有节奏地喊我的名字，是我们全班，喊得乱七八糟，一个调都不在。我把步子缩小，小步，不停。最后五十米，前面两个人手拉手冲线，看台上喊声一下子炸开，我的名字混在里面，谁也听不清谁，可每一声都砸在我背上。

我撞线的时候是最后一名，弯着腰干呕，体育老师递来一瓶水。我拧了半天拧不开，手抖。老师帮我把盖子拧开，说：跑完了。三个字，跟电影里那匹小跛马一样。我咕咚咕咚喝半瓶，咸的，分不清是汗还是别的。

现在那张运动会号码布还贴在我书桌侧面，六号，边角卷起来了。它提醒我：勇敢不是把别人甩在身后，是把想停下来的自己甩在身后。跑道很长，我跑得最慢，可我跑完了。这就够了，这就很勇敢。

The Little Lame Horse on the Eight-Hundred-Meter Track

Before the New Year party, our class needed someone for the eight hundred meters at the sports meet, and nobody raised a hand. The PE teacher asked me if I dared. I shook my head fast. I had signed up once last year: at the second lap my throat tasted of blood, my legs turned to lead, and in front of the whole class I walked the last stretch. Ever since, just hearing the words eight hundred meters made my ears burn.

On Saturday the whole family went to a cartoon about a herd of little horses running a relay in Snow Valley. The leader made a mistake and put a small lame horse,

one hind leg a little crooked, on the longest leg of the race. The little lame horse stood in the wind with its ears pressed flat. It ran with a limp, other horses passed it one by one in the snow mist, yet the sound of its wind never stopped. The most dangerous part was the ice bridge: one of its legs jammed into a crack in the ice. I thought it would stop and wait for rescue. It pulled its leg out, changed the way it carried the load, and went on running with the cloth bundle on its back. Someone in the hall whispered: it is not winning either. I heard that, and my heart went boom boom — it finished.

When the lights came on, I sat there thinking for a long time. When I walked the last stretch last year, what did the class look like? I remember I could not lift my head, yet I seemed to hear someone say: finishing on foot is still impressive. At the time I took those words as pity. Now, thinking it over, they may have been true. The little lame horse did not win either, but every horse in Snow Valley remembers it crossing the ice bridge with the bundle on its back.

On Monday I found the PE teacher and said I wanted to sign up for the eight hundred meters again. The teacher lifted an eyebrow and wrote my name on the list. For days after that, I walked laps of the playground after school, out of breath by the second lap, and kept walking after catching my breath. Mom shelled vegetables by the horizontal bar without lifting her head, and only said as I passed: today you walked half a lap more than yesterday.

The day of the race the wind was strong. After the gun I fell to the back. The first lap was fine; at the second lap my throat began to taste of blood — the same taste as last year. My legs wanted to stop, and I heard the stands chanting my name in rhythm, the whole class, shouting all jumbled, not one note in tune. I made my steps smaller, small steps, never stopping. In the last fifty meters, two runners ahead crossed the line hand in hand, and the shouting in the stands suddenly burst open. My name was mixed in there, no one could tell whose voice was whose, yet every shout landed on my back.

When I crossed the line I was last, bent over retching, and the PE teacher handed me a bottle of water. I twisted the cap for ages without opening it, my hands shaking. The teacher twisted it open for me and said: you finished. Three words, just like that little lame horse in the movie. I gulped down half the bottle. It was salty, and I could not tell whether it was sweat or something else.

Now my race number from the sports meet is still taped to the side of my desk, number six, its corners curling up. It reminds me: courage is not leaving others behind you, it is leaving the part of you that wants to stop behind you. The track is long, I ran the slowest, but I finished. That is enough. That is brave.