我挡在它们路上的那块纸板

轮到我值日那天，我负责冲墙边那条走廊。拖把桶推到墙角裂缝前，我停住了——一条密密的蚂蚁线正横穿走廊，拖把带过去的水肯定会把它们拦腰截断。

负责保洁的陈伯正好路过，摆手拦住我：等一下，让人家搬完。他说他看了这些蚂蚁好几年，勤快得很，断了人家的路不好。我把拖把放下，蹲在他旁边。

侦察蚁打头。它跑到队伍前头，碰地砖，碰门框脚，最后碰上一支不知谁掉的铅笔。它围着铅笔转了一圈，回去用触角碰了碰后面的两只，队伍就改了方向，从铅笔旁边兜过去。

搬运队伍搬的是死蝉的翅膀和虫卵，一只嘴里一口。大件由几只合抬，前面那只领方向，后面的用后腿往前推。陈伯说，那些来回跑、见谁碰谁的，是在传话：这条通，或者那条堵了。

我起了个坏念头，从垃圾桶里抽出一块纸板，横着挡在路线中间。前面的蚂蚁停住。有的往上爬，纸板光溜溜的，滑下来；有的想绕，纸板太宽，绕不出头。我以为这条路算被我堵死了，几只蚂蚁却贴着纸板的边往上爬，脚勾住撕开的毛边，一只一只翻了过去。后面的跟着，整支队伍从纸板上翻了过去。

我把纸板抽掉了。陈伯笑：你看，人家自己找出路了。蚂蚁们也不在意纸板没了，接着走刚蹚出来的新线。等整队过完，我才提起拖把冲走廊，绕着那条线。

教室里的黑板报还没画完，我正赌气，怪队友不听我的。看蚂蚁翻过纸板，我忽然想：它们从不吵谁的方案好，路堵了就先绕，绕过去再论谁带谁跟。蚂蚁的分工不是贴在墙上的规矩，是每一只都在队伍里找到自己的位置。回到教室，我拿起马克笔，画的是没人领的那一段。

The Cardboard I Put in Their Way

The day I was on cleaning duty, my job was hosing down the corridor along the wall. I stopped the bucket in front of the crack at the corner — a dense column of ants was crossing the corridor, and the water from my mop would surely cut them in half.

Grandpa Chen, the cleaner, happened to pass by and waved me to wait. Hold on, he said, let them finish moving. He had watched these ants for years, he told me; they are hardworking, and it would be wrong to cut off their road. I set the mop down and squatted beside him.

The scout ant led. It ran ahead of the column, touching the floor tiles, touching the base of the door frame, and finally touching a pencil someone had dropped. It circled the pencil once, went back and tapped antennae with two ants behind it, and the whole column changed direction, swinging around the pencil.

The carrying team hauled the wings of dead cicadas and bundles of eggs, one mouthful each. For the heavy pieces, several ants lifted together: the one in front

set the direction, the ones behind pushed with their hind legs. Grandpa Chen said the ants running back and forth, tapping whoever they met, were passing word along: this way is open, or that way is blocked.

A mean idea came to me. I pulled a piece of cardboard out of the trash bin and laid it across their route. The ants at the front stopped. Some climbed; the cardboard was too smooth and they slid down. Some tried to go around; the cardboard was too wide. Just as I was sure I had sealed the road for good, a few ants climbed along the edge of the board, hooked their feet on the torn fibrous border, and crossed over one by one. The rest followed, and the whole column went over the cardboard.

I pulled the cardboard away. Grandpa Chen laughed: see, they found their own way out. The ants did not seem to notice the board was gone; they kept to the new path they had just broken. Only after the last ant passed did I pick up the mop and rinse the corridor, giving that line a wide berth.

Our classroom blackboard poster was still unfinished, and I was sulking, blaming my teammates for not listening to me. Watching the ants cross the cardboard, it struck me: they never argue over whose plan is best. When the road is blocked, they detour first, and sort out who leads and who follows afterward. The division of labor among ants is not a rule posted on a wall; it is each one finding its place inside the line. Back in the classroom, I picked up a marker and painted the section nobody had claimed.