针还是那根针，我变了

说真的，读《草房子》之前，我以为勇敢就是敢跟别人打架，敢走夜路。我从来没觉得自己跟勇敢沾过边，因为我怕打针，怕得惊天动地。上次抽血，护士刚把酒精棉球擦在我胳膊上，我就开始哭，哭到一半针还没扎呢。全班排着队等我，我觉得全班的眼睛都在我后脑勺上。

书里的桑桑得了怪病，脖子上的肿块疼起来，他整个人弯成一只小虾。他每天喝药，那药苦得连大人都皱眉，他端起来，一口一口往下咽，咽完了咂咂嘴，还说苦什么，甜得很。有一回疼得满地打滚，他爸爸要背他去看病，他怕父亲累，自己扶着墙走。我读到这里，把书合上了，因为脸上有点热。

我想起我妈每周带我去做理疗，扎那种很细的针。我每次都要我妈按住我的手，针一进去我就扭，护士说别动别动，我越喊针越疼。本来十分钟能做完的事，每次都折腾半个钟头。疼是真的疼，可我喊得越凶，好像就越疼，好像我把疼喊大了十倍。

桑桑教会我的不是不怕。他疼，他也怕，书里写他夜里也偷偷想过自己会不会死掉。他怕，可是他把药喝下去，把日子过下去。我想，勇敢不是不疼，是疼着还不动，还认。

这个月复查，又要抽血。轮到我的时候，我把《草房子》攥在手里，眼睛看着窗外那棵树，胳膊伸出去，一动不动。酒精棉球擦上来，凉的；针扎进来，我吸了一口气，没喊。拔针了，护士说，这孩子真稳。我走出门，我妈在门口等，我举起胳膊给她看：没哭。我妈愣了两秒，笑了。

针还是那根针，一点没变，疼还是那点疼。变的是我。一本书里有个孩子疼给我看，我才知道，原来我可以这样。这就是读书对我的用处：它不能替我疼，但它把怎么疼着站起来，演给我看了一遍。

The Needle Is Still the Needle, but I Changed

Honestly, before reading The Straw House, I thought brave meant daring to fight other kids, daring to walk on a dark road. I never thought I had anything to do with bravery, because I am afraid of injections — afraid in a way that shakes the whole room. At the last blood test, the nurse had only wiped the alcohol swab on my arm and I started crying, crying so hard halfway through that the needle had not even gone in. The whole class stood in line waiting for me, and I felt every pair of eyes on the back of my head.

Sangsang in the book falls ill with a strange disease. The lump on his neck hurts so badly he bends into a little shrimp. Every day he drinks his medicine, bitter enough to make adults frown, and he lifts the cup and swallows it mouthful by mouthful, then smacks his lips and says what's bitter about it, it's quite sweet. Once the pain made him roll on the ground, and when his father wanted to carry him to the doctor, he was afraid his father would be exhausted, so he held the wall and

walked himself. I read to this point and closed the book, because my face felt a little hot.

I remembered my mother taking me for physiotherapy every week, those very thin needles. Every time I made my mother hold my hand down, and the moment the needle entered I twisted. The nurse said don't move, don't move, and the more I screamed the more it hurt. What should have taken ten minutes always dragged on for half an hour. The pain was real pain, but the louder I screamed, the more it seemed to hurt, as if I shouted the pain ten times bigger.

What Sangsang taught me is not being unafraid. He hurts, he is afraid too — the book writes that at night he secretly wondered whether he would die. He is afraid, yet he drinks the medicine down and carries on with his days. I think bravery is not the absence of pain; it is hurting and still not moving, still accepting.

This month at the follow-up visit, another blood test. When my turn came, I gripped The Straw House in my hand, looked out the window at a tree, held my arm out, and did not move. The alcohol swab came on, cold; the needle went in, I took a breath, and did not cry out. The needle came out, and the nurse said, what a steady child. Walking out, my mother waited at the door. I held my arm up to show her: no tears. She froze for two seconds, then laughed.

The needle is still that needle, not changed at all; the pain is still that pain. What changed is me. Somewhere in a book a child showed me his pain, and only then did I learn that I could be like this. This is what reading does for me: it cannot hurt for me, but it acted out, once for me to see, how to hurt and still stand up.

苦药要一口一口喝

《草房子》里让我读得最慢的一段，是桑桑喝药。那药又苦又腥，他端起来，一口一口往下咽，咽得喉咙一耸一耸，咽完还冲他爸笑，说这药甜。我读到这里停了一下，因为我想起我妈给我冲的感冒冲剂，甜得发腻，我还嫌苦，每次含在嘴里半天，等它自己在舌头上化开，我妈说吞下去，我脖子一缩，药汁溅一桌子。

桑桑的病比我重一万倍。他脖子上的肿块疼起来，他弯着腰，扶着墙，一步一步走。他怕他爸背他累，自己走。他夜里疼醒了不吭声，怕他妈听见了哭。他那么疼，药还是一碗一碗喝，从没倒掉过一碗。我连一口甜药都要含半天，我脸上热。

我更不敢想的是打针。上次学校组织体检抽血，酒精棉刚擦上去我就哭了，针还没扎。护士让我握拳，我攥着我同桌的袖子。做完之后我同桌一句话没说，把棉签帮我按了五分钟。我当时觉得丢人，又觉得没办法，谁让我怕疼呢。

可是书里桑桑也怕疼啊，他疼得在地上滚，他也偷偷哭过。他跟我不一样的地方，不是他不知道疼，是他不把疼喊大。他把苦药一口一口喝，把疼一天一天过。喊，不会让针变细；不喊，也不会让针变粗。可是不喊的那个我，站得直一点。

所以我做了一个很小的决定：从下次喝药开始，一口吞，不喊苦；这个月去做理疗，针扎进来，我数自己的呼吸，一下，两下，不动。这个决定没人知道，不用告诉谁，它是我跟桑桑之间的一个约定。

上个月理疗，我真的从头到尾没扭。做完我坐在椅子上，出了一身汗，可是我心里特别亮，像有人把教室的灯全打开了。回家我把《草房子》放回书架，跟它说：你等着，我长大一点了。它没说话。书都不说话。可我知道它听见了。

Bitter Medicine Must Be Drunk Mouthful by Mouthful

The passage in The Straw House I read most slowly is Sangsang drinking his medicine. The medicine is bitter and fishy; he lifts it and swallows mouthful by mouthful, his throat bobbing as he swallows, and when he finishes he smiles at his father and says this medicine is sweet. I paused here, because I remembered the cold-drink mix my mother makes for me, sweet enough to cloy, and still I complain it is bitter. Every time I hold it in my mouth for ages, waiting for it to dissolve on its own on my tongue. My mother says swallow it, I shrink my neck, and the medicine splashes all over the table.

Sangsang's illness is ten thousand times worse than mine. When the lump on his neck hurts, he bends over, holds the wall, walks step by step. He is afraid his father will wear himself out carrying him, so he walks himself. He wakes at night in pain without a sound, afraid his mother will hear and cry. In such pain, still he drinks bowl after bowl of medicine, never poured one away. And I hold even a mouthful of sweet medicine for ages. My face is hot.

What I dare not even think about is injections. At the school physical last term, the alcohol swab had barely touched me and I was crying, the needle not yet in. The nurse told me to clench my fist; I gripped my deskmate's sleeve instead. Afterward my deskmate said nothing and pressed the cotton ball for me for five minutes. I felt ashamed then, and also helpless — what can you do when you are afraid of pain.

But Sangsang in the book is afraid of pain too. He rolls on the ground, he has cried in secret. Where he differs from me is not that he does not know pain; it is that he does not shout the pain bigger. He drinks the bitter medicine mouthful by mouthful, he lives the pain day by day. Shouting will not make the needle thinner; not shouting will not make it thicker either. But the me that does not shout stands a little straighter.

So I made a very small decision: starting next time, I drink my medicine in one go and do not complain it is bitter; at this month's physiotherapy, when the needle goes in, I count my breaths, one, two, and do not move. Nobody knows this decision, I need not tell anyone. It is a pact between Sangsang and me.

Last month at the physiotherapy, I truly did not twist once from start to finish. Afterward I sat in the chair soaked in sweat, but inside I felt very bright, as if someone had switched on every light in the classroom. Going home I put The Straw House back on the shelf and said to it: you wait for me, I have grown a little. It did not answer. Books never answer. But I know it heard.

桑桑，我想跟你说说那根针

桑桑：我读完了你的故事，有些话想跟你说说，就说那根针吧。

你那碗药，我光读着都觉得苦。你仰起头一口吞下去，苦得脸都皱成一团，可你从来不把苦喊大。病最重的那些日子，你爸爸天天背你去医疗点；夜里你疼醒了，也不出声，怕吵醒妈妈，怕她听见了跟着掉眼泪。

我得跟你承认一件事：我怕针。上学期班里集体打流感疫苗，棉签刚碰到胳膊，我就叫出了声，全班都回头看我。我往队伍后面躲，越躲越靠后，连着两次都装肚子疼逃掉了。

我知道丢人，可我就是管不住自己。那天晚上我又翻到你那几章，看见你疼得弯下腰，还反过来安慰爸爸，冲他笑。我盯着那一页想：同样是疼，同样是针，你怎么能不喊，我却先丢了嗓子？

那天我决定学你一个办法。不是让自己不怕——怕还是怕的——而是不把苦喊大。针扎进来之前，先深吸一口气，然后数自己的呼吸，一下，两下，三下，身子不许动，也不许把眼睛闭得死死的。

我还给自己定了一条更小的规矩：药再苦，一口喝完，不许含在嘴里半天；扎针之前不许求人按住手。妈妈说你跟书里那个人较什么劲，我说我不跟他较劲，我就是想试试，他行得通的事，我行不行得通。

上个月回医院复查抽血，护士刚捏紧我的胳膊，我就开始数。数到第七下，针已经拔出来了，护士说你都没动。我攥着你的书，心里特别想告诉你：桑桑，我做到了，我一声都没吭。回家的路上我把这件事讲给我妈听，她半天没说话，后来伸手摸了摸我的头。

桑桑，你疼过，可你没让疼牵着走。你教会我的不是不害怕，而是害怕的时候照样把该做的事做完。谢谢你疼过。你的疼，到我这里，变成了一点点我的胆量。我们扯平了。

Sangsang, I Want to Talk to You About That Needle

Sangsang: I have finished your story, and there are things I want to say to you. Let me start with that needle.

Just reading about that bowl of medicine made my own mouth bitter. You tipped your head back and swallowed it in one go, your face scrunched up from the bitterness, but you never made the bitterness louder. In the worst days of your illness, your father carried you to the clinic on his back every day; at night you woke in pain without a sound, afraid to wake your mother, afraid she would hear and cry along with you.

I have to confess something to you: I am afraid of needles. Last term, when our class lined up for the flu shot, the moment the alcohol swab touched my arm I yelled, and the whole class turned to look. I ducked toward the back of the line, hiding farther and farther back, and twice I pretended my stomach hurt just to escape.

I knew it was shameful, but I could not stop myself. That night I opened your chapters again and saw you bent double in pain, yet comforting your father instead, smiling at him. I stared at that page and thought: the same pain, the same needle — how could you stay silent while I lost my voice first?

That day I decided to borrow one of your tricks. Not to stop being afraid — I still am — but not to make the suffering bigger. Before the needle goes in, take a deep breath, then count your own breaths: one, two, three. Do not move, and do not squeeze your eyes shut either.

I set myself one smaller rule as well: no matter how bitter the medicine, finish it in one sip, never hold it in the mouth forever; and before an injection, never beg someone to hold my hand down. My mother said, why compete with a person in a book. I said I am not competing with him — I just want to try whether what worked for him can work for me too.

Last month, at the follow-up blood test, the moment the nurse tightened her hand on my arm, I started counting. By the seventh count the needle was already out, and the nurse said I had not moved at all. Clutching your book, I wanted to tell you right then: Sangsang, I did it — I did not make a single sound. On the way home I told my mother about it; she was quiet for a long while, then reached over and patted my head.

Sangsang, you knew pain, but you never let pain lead you around. What you taught me is not the absence of fear, but doing what must be done even while afraid. Thank you for having hurt. Your pain, by the time it reached me, had turned into a little bit of my courage. Now we are even.

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