升旗手的那根绳子

林昊被定为升旗手，通知是前一天放学时体育老师口头说的，就一句：明天你拉绳子。他回家练了一晚上，把一根晾衣绳绑在门框上，手一松一紧地拽，拽得掌心发红。他奶奶在旁边择菜，问他拉这绳子挣不挣钱，他说这是升旗，奶奶哦了一声，又问升一次几毛钱。他没答，回屋继续练。

早上七点半，他站在旗杆底座旁边，袖标别在校服左臂，别针硌着肩膀。国歌响起，他右手一松一紧地送绳子，红旗顺着杆子往上爬，爬到顶正好和国歌最后一个音碰头，这是他昨晚练了几十遍算好的数。风来了，旗面在他头顶哗地展开，绳子的震动从掌心一直麻到胳膊肘。他仰头看旗，余光里全年级几千个人站成方块，安静，笔立。

退队仪式开始，他站在旗杆边没动，位置离人群最近。辅导员说请解下红领巾，他听见了那场小雨一样的布料声，几千只手同时抬起来，然后几千条红领巾从几千个领口抽出去。离他最近的一个男生解完，把红领巾攥成一团塞进裤兜，塞到一半又掏出来，抖开，叠了两下，叠得笨手笨脚。林昊看见那个男生耳朵红了，跟自己今早照镜子时一个颜色。呼号开始，他张了嘴，声音混进几千人的声浪里，旗杆嗡嗡地跟着响。喊完那半秒，他忽然觉得旗杆的影子比平时长。

回教室的路上袖标被同班女生借去戴了一圈，传着戴，人人都在左臂上摸一下，像摸一个勋章。下午写信，信纸发到手里，林昊写了三行：我今天升了旗。我今天退队了。三年后的你要是没当上升旗手，也别难过。写完他把袖标摘下来，和信一起塞进信封，封口按了三遍。同桌说袖标怎么也封进去，他说这是今天的一半。

放学他最后一个走，绕到旗杆边站了一会儿。底座上有块水泥补过的疤，绳子还挂在滑轮上轻轻晃。他伸手把绳子攥了一下，松手，绳子哗地滑下去一截。他想起奶奶问的几毛钱，笑出声来。升一次值多少钱他不知道，他只知道自己手心的红印子三天都不会退。

The Flag Raiser's Rope

Lin Hao was picked as the flag raiser. The PE teacher told him verbally after school the day before, one sentence: tomorrow you work the rope. He practiced all evening, tying a clothesline to his doorframe, hauling it loose-tight, loose-tight until his palm turned red. His grandmother sat nearby shelling vegetables and asked whether pulling that rope paid money. He said it was raising the flag. She said oh, then asked how many cents per raise. He did not answer and went back to practicing.

At seven thirty in the morning he stood beside the base of the flagpole, his armband pinned to the left sleeve of his uniform, the pin digging into his shoulder. When the anthem began, his right hand eased the rope loose-tight, and the red flag climbed the pole, reaching the top exactly as the anthem's last note landed - a number he had calculated through dozens of practice rounds the night before. The wind came, the flag's face snapped open above his head, and the rope's vibration traveled from his palm all the way numb to his elbow. He tilted his face up to the flag, and

in his peripheral vision thousands of students stood in squares, silent, upright.

The leaving ceremony began, and he stayed at his post by the flagpole, closest to the crowd. When the counselor said please remove your red scarves, he heard that rain-of-cloth sound: thousands of hands rising, thousands of scarves sliding out of thousands of collars. The boy nearest to him finished, balled his scarf up and shoved it into his pants pocket, then pulled it halfway back out, shook it open, and folded it twice, clumsily. Lin Hao saw the boy's ears go red - the same color he had seen in his own mirror that morning. The call-and-response started; he opened his mouth, his voice dissolving into the wave of thousands, the flagpole humming along. In the half second after the shouting ended, he suddenly felt the flagpole's shadow was longer than usual.

On the way back to class, a female classmate borrowed his armband and wore it around; it passed from arm to arm, everyone patting their left sleeve once, as if touching a medal. In the afternoon came the letter. When the paper reached his hand, Lin Hao wrote three lines: Today I raised the flag. Today I left the Pioneers. You of three years from now, if you never become a flag raiser, don't be sad. When he finished, he unpinned the armband and sealed it in the envelope with the letter, pressing the flap down three times. His deskmate asked why the armband went in too. He said it was half of today.

He left last after school and detoured to stand by the flagpole for a while. The base bore a patch of repaired cement, and the rope still hung from the pulley, swaying lightly. He reached out, gripped the rope, let go, and it hissed down a length. He remembered his grandmother's question about how many cents per raise and laughed out loud. He did not know what one raise was worth. He only knew the red marks on his palms would not fade for three days.