气球吹到第七个的时候

吹气球这件事，我原以为是小菜一碟。留校布置教室的第一个晚上，我拆了两包气球，坐在讲台边的椅子上吹，吹到第七个，眼前发黑，太阳穴突突地跳，我把气球口一捏，趴在桌上缓。缓过来接着吹。腮帮子发酸，后来不是酸，是麻，哈出来的气都不成样子，气球吹得歪歪扭扭，红的里夹着几个瘪的，像一排站不直的学生。

彩带是学校发的，一卷一卷，背面有双面胶。我踩着椅子往墙上方贴，第一贴贴歪了，撕下来重贴，胶失去了黏性，风一过就翘边。我改用图钉，图钉是我从办公室借的，一颗一颗按进去，按的时候心里数着数，数到二十三，手抖了一下，钉子顶到拇指，我含着手在教室里转了两圈，没出声——整层楼就我一个人，走廊的灯只亮一半。

黑板上的六个大字，我拿粉笔打好了稿，六一快乐四个字写歪了，擦了重写，擦了三回，那块黑板擦得发白，字反倒显得浮。最后我退后两步看，整间教室彩带是彩带，气球是气球，各自为政，不好看。我站在教室中间愣了一会儿，把最矮那排桌子往中间拢了拢，腾出一小块空地，气球拿胶带粘在四角，风从窗缝进来，气球轻轻晃，这下顺眼了。

弄到九点多，我锁了门回宿舍，倒头就睡，梦里全是气球炸的声音。

第二天早上七点半，我提前到教室，把门虚掩上，自己站在讲台边。走廊里先是脚步声，然后是压低的嗓门，有人隔着门缝喊老师，喊完一串笑。门被推开的一瞬，几十个人涌进来，眼睛齐刷刷往墙上、往天花板上扫，欢呼声一层一层撞过来，有个男孩张开胳膊在彩带底下转圈，转得彩带颤，有个女孩伸手去够气球，够不着，跳了两下。他们全没看见那排贴歪又重贴的彩带，没看见黑板上擦白了的那一块，他们只看见六一到了。

我站在讲台边上，手背在身后，指腹上还有图钉按出的白印。那一刻我心里有个东西轻轻落定了：原来当老师，就是头天晚上一个人对着空教室较劲，第二天看他们把这份较劲当成理所当然的欢喜。这欢喜不归我，可这欢喜是冲着我来的。

后来每年六一前夜，我都留下来布置。气球还是吹到头晕，彩带还是贴得七歪八扭，只是不用图钉了，学校换了无痕胶。有一年一个学生问我，老师，你们每年都这么布置，不累吗。我说累。他想了想说，那明年我还来早点。他说到做到，第二年真来了，帮我把椅子搬来搬去，还吹气球，腮帮子鼓得比我还响。

By the Seventh Balloon

Blowing up balloons, I had assumed, was child's play. My first evening staying late to decorate the classroom, I opened two packs of balloons and sat on a chair by the podium blowing them. By the seventh, my vision went dark and my temples throbbed; I pinched the balloon's neck, slumped on the desk, and rested. Then got up and kept going. My cheeks went from sore to numb, and the air I blew came out shapeless, the balloons lopsided, a few deflated ones mixed among the red like a row of students who

couldn't stand straight.

The streamers came from the school, roll after roll, double-sided tape on the back. I stood on a chair to stick them high on the walls. The first strip went crooked; I peeled it off and redid it, but the tape lost its grip, and it curled up whenever air moved. I switched to thumbtacks borrowed from the office, pressing them in one by one, counting under my breath. At twenty-three my hand slipped and the tack hit my thumb. I sucked it and paced twice around the room, making no sound - I was the only one on the whole floor, the corridor lights half off.

For the big characters on the blackboard I sketched them out in chalk first. The four characters for Happy June First came out crooked; I erased and rewrote, erased three times, until that patch of board scrubbed pale and the characters looked like they floated. Finally I stepped back to look. The room was all wrong - streamers being streamers, balloons being balloons, each going its own way. I stood in the middle of the room in a daze, then pushed the low desks toward the center to clear a small open space, taped balloons to the four corners, and with air from the window crack they swayed gently. Now it looked right.

I finished past nine, locked up, went back to the dorm, and fell straight asleep, my dreams full of bursting balloons.

At seven-thirty the next morning I arrived early, left the door ajar, and stood by the podium. First came footsteps in the corridor, then hushed voices; someone shouted Teacher through the crack, then a string of giggles. The moment the door swung open, dozens of children poured in, eyes sweeping the walls and ceiling in unison, cheers crashing over me layer by layer. A boy spun in circles under the streamers with his arms wide, making them tremble; a girl jumped twice reaching for a balloon, couldn't reach. None of them saw the streamers I had redone crookedly, none saw the pale scrubbed patch on the board. They only saw that June First had come.

I stood at the edge of the podium with my hands behind my back, the pads of my fingers still white where the tacks had pressed. Something in me settled softly at that moment: so this is what teaching is - wrestling alone with an empty classroom the night before, then watching the next morning as they take that wrestling for granted as simple delight. The delight isn't mine, yet it comes aimed straight at me.

After that I stayed to decorate before every June First. The balloons still made me dizzy, the streamers still went crooked, only no more thumbtacks - the school switched to residue-free adhesive. One year a student asked: Teacher, you decorate like this every year, aren't you tired? I said yes. He thought about it and said, Then I'll come early next year too. He kept his word: the next year he really came, hauling chairs for me and blowing balloons, his cheeks puffing louder than mine.

天花板上的那颗气球

布置六一教室这件事，我从第一年教书干到今年，闭着眼都能干。气球吹多大、彩带挂多高、黑板上的花边往哪边弯，手上都有数。今年却有一处不在我的数里。

头天晚上我吹气球，班长在旁边搭手，帮我打结。他父母在南方打工，过年才回，他跟着爷爷奶奶住。这样的孩子我带过许多，通常闹得最凶的就是他们。今年这个不一样，话少，递气球的时候手指很轻，打结打得比我打的还紧。我吹到第八个头晕，靠在椅背上缓，他忽然问：老师，气球能粘到天花板上吗。我说能，怎么，你想粘。他说，我想粘一个最大的。

我没多想，把最大的一颗红气球递给他，又给他找了双面胶。他踩上凳子，踮着脚，把气球粘在天花板正中间，粘完下来，仰头看了很久，像在确认它不会掉。我问为什么粘中间。他想了想说，中间高，站哪儿都能看见。我说对，站哪儿都能看见。他没再说话，把剩下的气球一个个递给我，递得整整齐齐。

我挂彩带的时候他在下面扶着凳子。彩带从这面墙拉到那面墙，中间要垂一道弧，我比着高度，他忽然说老师再高一点。我说再高就贴到灯管上了。他说，就是要高一点，矮了我够不着没关系，我奶奶个子矮，她来看节目，也得看得见。

我愣了一下，把彩带往上挪了两指。挪完我看他，他蹲在地上收气球皮，碎纸屑，像什么都没说过。

第二天孩子们进门，欢呼照旧，彩带底下照旧转圈的、够气球的、比谁嗓门大的。节目排在下午，家长能来的都来了。他奶奶坐在最后一排，个子确实矮，脖子往前伸着。演出到一半，我注意到那孩子不演节目的时候就仰头看天花板，看那颗红气球。气球在天花板上纹丝不动，他也看得纹丝不动。

散场后人走空了，我收拾教室，抬头，那颗气球还在。双面胶的边缘翘起一小条，它悬着，没掉。我搬凳子把它摘下来，放到他桌上，压在一本语文书底下。第二天早上，气球不在桌上了，语文书里夹着一小片双面胶的白边。

我教了二十年书，布置过几十间教室。天花板正中间该粘什么，往年我从来没想过。今年我知道了：有的孩子要的不是节目，是抬头就能看见的一个位置。

The Balloon on the Ceiling

I have decorated classrooms for June First since my very first year of teaching, and this year marks another. Balloons to what size, streamers to what height, which way the chalk border on the blackboard should curve - my hands know it all by heart. This year, though, one detail fell outside what my hands knew.

The night before, while I blew up balloons, our class monitor helped by tying the knots. His parents work in the south and come home only for New Year; he lives with

his grandparents. I have taught many children like him, and usually they are the loudest rascals. This one was different - quiet, handing me balloons with careful fingers, tying knots tighter than mine. After the eighth balloon I leaned back dizzy, and he suddenly asked: Teacher, can a balloon be stuck to the ceiling? I said yes, why, do you want to stick one? He said, I want to stick the biggest one.

I didn't think much of it, handed him the biggest red balloon, and found him some double-sided tape. He climbed onto a stool, rose on his toes, and stuck the balloon dead center on the ceiling. Then he climbed down and looked up at it for a long time, as if making sure it wouldn't fall. I asked why the center. He thought and said: the center is high - you can see it from anywhere. I said right, visible from anywhere. He said nothing more and went on handing me the rest of the balloons, one by one, neatly.

While I hung the streamers, he steadied the stool below. The streamer ran from this wall to that one, sagging into an arc in the middle. I was sighting the height when he said: Teacher, a bit higher. I said higher and it's on the lamp tube. He said, Just a bit higher. If it's low I can't reach it, that's fine - but my grandmother is short, and when she comes to watch the show, she has to be able to see it too.

I froze for a beat, then moved the streamer up two finger-widths. When I looked back at him, he was crouched on the floor gathering balloon scraps and paper bits, as if he had said nothing at all.

The next day the children burst in, cheering as always; under the streamers the usual ones spun in circles, jumped for balloons, competed over who could shout loudest. The show was in the afternoon, and every parent who could come, came. His grandmother sat in the last row, indeed short, her neck craning forward. Halfway through the program, I noticed that whenever he wasn't performing, he tilted his head back to look at the red balloon on the ceiling. The balloon hung motionless; he watched it just as motionless.

After everyone left, I tidied the classroom and looked up - the balloon was still there. A sliver of its tape edge had curled, but it hung, unfallen. I fetched a stool, took it down, and placed it on his desk, pressed under his Chinese textbook. The next morning the balloon was gone from the desk, and inside the textbook was a small white edge of double-sided tape.

Twenty years of teaching, dozens of classrooms decorated. What belongs dead center on a ceiling had never occurred to me before this year. Now I know: for some children, what they want isn't the show - it's a spot they can see just by looking up.

彩带垂下来的那道弧

这是我在这间教室过的最后一个六一。明年六月他们毕业，我接新的班，这间教室换别人布置。所以我吹气球吹得格外慢，像要把每一个都记熟。

气球还是那两包，红的黄的蓝的。我坐在最后一排的桌上吹，不坐讲台边了。讲台边那把椅子我坐了五年，椅腿有一条腿短，垫过三次纸片，纸片是我自己叠的，叠成三角，塞进去，刚好。现在我不坐它了，坐学生的桌子，桌子矮，膝盖顶着下巴，吹起来更费劲，倒正合我意——费劲的东西记得牢。

挂彩带的时候我手抖。不是累的，是挂到后墙那条时，想起五年前这间教室刚分给我们，墙是毛坯的，白灰一摸一手。我们头一年布置，彩带贴不住，全用图钉，后墙被钉出密密麻麻的小眼。这些年那面墙刷过两回漆，小眼还在，凸出来，摸上去像盲文。今年我把彩带正好挂在那片小眼上，横着拉过去，像给那面墙拉了一条围巾。

黑板上方的横幅我写了两个字又停住。本来要写欢度六一，我写了欢度，笔停在半空，改成了最后一个六一。写完自己看，觉得矫情，擦了。擦到一半又留着欢度两个字，后头空着。空着就空着，他们看得懂。

第二天早上我站在门后，像所有老师那样等。门推开，他们进来。往常这个点是欢呼，今年不一样——前排的孩子先看见黑板上空着的那截，脚步一顿，全班跟着静了两秒。那两秒里我站在门后，手指抠着门框上的漆皮。然后不知道谁先喊了一声，欢呼炸开，比往年都响，响得有点用力。有个平时最闹的男生进门不跑，走到自己座位，把椅子轻轻放下来，放之前拿袖子擦了一遍椅面。

节目照排，游戏照玩，彩带底下照旧转圈。有个女孩往我手里塞了颗糖，儿童节发的，牛皮纸袋里挑出来的，糖纸皱了，看得出在兜里揣了很久。我剥开吃了，甜的，甜得我心里发紧。

散场，收桌椅，扫纸屑。我在墙角捡到一根没吹起来的气球皮，黄的，口上打了结，不知道是谁吹了一半放弃了。我把它揣进兜里，和今天那颗糖的糖纸放在一起。

锁门的时候我回头看了一眼。彩带还垂着那道弧，天花板上的气球还在晃。明年这里会有新的彩带、新的气球、新的欢呼，坐最后一排吹气球的换一个人。我拧了锁，把钥匙交出去，交之前用袖子把钥匙上的灰擦掉了——擦它做什么，我也说不上来。

The Arc the Streamer Sags Into

This is my last June First in this classroom. Next June they graduate, I take a new class, and someone else will decorate this room. So I blew up the balloons extra slowly, as if to memorize each one.

Still the same two packs - red, yellow, blue. I sat on the last row of desks to blow them, not by the podium anymore. I had sat on that podium chair for five years;

one of its legs was short, shimmed three times with folded paper triangles I made myself, and it fit just right. Now I sat at a student desk instead. The desk was low, my knees against my chin, and blowing was harder - which suited me. Harder things stick in the memory.

My hand shook as I hung the streamers. Not from fatigue. When I reached the strip on the back wall, I remembered five years ago, when this room was first assigned to us: bare walls, whitewash that came off on your fingers. Our first year's decorations wouldn't stick; we used thumbtacks for everything, and the back wall got pricked full of tiny holes. The wall has been repainted twice since, but the bumps remain - you can read them by touch like Braille. This year I hung the streamer right across those bumps, pulled straight across, like putting a scarf on that wall.

I wrote two characters on the banner above the blackboard and stopped. It was supposed to read Celebrate June First. I wrote Celebrate, pen hovering, then changed it to Our Last June First. Reading it afterward I found it sentimental, and erased it. Halfway through erasing, I kept Celebrate and left the rest blank. Blank is fine - they'll understand.

The next morning I stood behind the door, waiting like teachers always do. The door opened; they came in. Usually this is the moment of cheering. This year it was different - the children in front spotted the blank stretch on the blackboard first, their steps faltered, and the whole class went quiet for two seconds. In those two seconds I stood behind the door picking at the paint on the frame. Then someone shouted first, and the cheering exploded, louder than any year, loud in a way that tried too hard. The rowdiest boy in class walked in without running, went to his seat, and set his chair down gently - after wiping the seat with his sleeve first.

The program ran as planned, the games as usual, circles still spinning under the streamers. A girl pressed a candy into my hand - a June First candy, picked out of her kraft paper bag, its wrapper wrinkled from long carrying in a pocket. I unwrapped and ate it. Sweet. Sweet enough to make my chest tighten.

After the crowd cleared, we stacked desks and swept up paper. In the corner I found an uninflated balloon skin, yellow, its neck knotted - someone had blown it halfway and given up. I put it in my pocket, alongside today's candy wrapper.

Locking up, I looked back. The streamer still sagged into its arc; the balloon on the ceiling still swayed. Next year there will be new streamers here, new balloons, new cheering, and someone else sitting in the last row blowing them up. I turned the lock and handed over the key - wiping its dust off with my sleeve first. Why I did that, I couldn't say.