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.