办公室的最后一把椅子

入职第一年，我接二年级，六一归我张罗。早上六点五十到教室，彩带贴得不平，中间鼓出一个包，我揭下来重贴，双面胶粘住了黑板边的漆，我拿指甲抠，抠不掉，越抠越急。

李老师来得早，站在门口看了一会儿，进来说，彩带不能从两头拉，要从中间往两边赶，包就没了。她顺手帮我把气球按颜色间隔排开，说颜色要错开，挤一块儿显乱。她带班二十年，布置教室像批改作业，快，稳。我站在旁边递双面胶，忽然想起我上学时教室里的彩带，原来都是这样出来的。

孩子们进来以后，教室炸了锅。有个男孩把气球摘下来满教室跑，我张嘴要训，想起今天是他们的节，把话咽回去，改成，气球要回墙上睡觉。他真把气球贴回墙上，还拍了拍。

中午看他们吃饭，是我这年最安静的一顿。我坐在最后一排旁边，规定是看着，不管纪律。有个女孩吃得慢，米粒粘在嘴角，同桌帮她一粒一粒弹掉。靠门那桌把鸡腿骨头摆成一排，比谁的干净。平时最闹的三个凑在一桌，那天反而吃得规矩，像互相约定好了不能给班级丢人。我把要提醒的话都在心里咽了。原来不用管的一天，他们自己会走稳。

下午发礼物前，我把名单念了三遍，怕念错。真念的时候还是错了半个字，把浩浩念成浩文，他自己举手纠正，全班都笑，我耳朵热。轮到最后一个小男孩，礼物不够了，差一个，我早发现了，从办公室拿来一个备用的小熊挂件，是我自己买的，想着万一。他接过去，先说了声谢谢老师，声音比平时大。

放学送走最后一个孩子，我回办公室拿包。办公室黑着灯，只剩我那一把椅子，桌上剩半卷双面胶和一捆没用完的气球。隔壁桌的老教师留了张纸条，说布置得不错，明年就会更快了。

我坐在自己那把椅子上，腿一下子软下来，不是累，是一种说不清的松。早上抠漆的那股急已经忘了，记得的是咽回去的那句训斥，和那三个吃得规矩的孩子。当老师头一年，我以为节日是给孩子的，跟我没关系。那天晚上我发现不对，一天里我学到的，比一个月备课学到的都多。

The Last Chair in the Office

In my first year of teaching I took second grade, and Children's Day was mine to organize. I got to the classroom at ten to seven. The streamers would not lie flat; a bump bulged in the middle. I peeled it off and reapplied it, and the tape took the paint off by the blackboard. I picked at the paint with my fingernail and only made it worse, and the more I picked, the more flustered I got.

Ms. Li arrived early, stood in the doorway watching for a while, then came in and said you cannot pull streamers from the ends; you smooth them from the middle outward and the bump goes away. She helped me space the balloons by alternating colors, saying colors must alternate or they look crowded in clumps. She has taught for twenty years, and decorating a classroom for her is like grading homework, fast and steady. I stood by handing her tape, and it suddenly occurred to me that the

streamers in my own childhood classrooms had all come out of hands like this.

Once the children came in, the classroom erupted. A boy took a balloon off the wall and ran around with it. I opened my mouth to scold, remembered it was their holiday, swallowed it, and said instead, the balloon needs to go back to the wall to sleep. He really pressed it back onto the wall and patted it.

Watching them eat at noon was the quietest meal of my year. I sat beside the last row, and the rule was to watch, not to police. A girl ate slowly, rice grains stuck at the corner of her mouth, and her deskmate flicked them off one by one. The desk by the door lined up their chicken bones in a row, comparing whose was cleanest. The three noisiest boys in class sat together that day and ate well-behaved, as if they had agreed among themselves not to embarrass the class. I swallowed every remark I wanted to make. So a day without policing, and they walk steady on their own.

Before handing out gifts in the afternoon, I read the roster three times for fear of a mistake. When I actually read it, I still got half a name wrong, reading Haohao as Haowen. He raised his hand to correct me, the whole class laughed, and my ears burned. When the last little boy came up, we were one gift short. I had noticed it early and brought a spare bear charm from the office, one I bought myself just in case. He took it and said thank you, teacher, louder than usual.

After seeing off the last child, I went back to the office for my bag. The office was dark except for my one chair, half a roll of tape and a bundle of leftover balloons on the desk. The veteran teacher at the next desk had left a note: nice job decorating, next year you will be quicker.

I sat down in my chair and my legs went soft all at once. Not from tiredness, but from a looseness I cannot name. The panic over the blackboard paint was already forgotten. What stayed was the scolding I swallowed and the three boys eating well-behaved. In my first year I thought the holiday belonged to the children and had nothing to do with me. That evening I realized I was wrong. In one day I learned more than in a month of lesson planning.