生日那天的苹果蛋糕

妈妈的生日赶上我值日，回家天都黑了。她在厨房煮面，灶上的火光一跳一跳。我站在厨房门口，兜里揣着从学校带回来的那只苹果，红皮的，是我用攒的零花钱买的。

我想给她削一只苹果，就当生日蛋糕。可我从来没削过。平时只见妈妈一手转苹果一手走刀，皮像一条不断的带子。我偷偷看过很多次，手却一次没练过。

我回屋关上门，从文具盒里翻出美术课用的削皮刀。塑料柄，刀头是锯齿状的小轮。我把它攥在手里，攥得出汗。苹果抵在桌角，刀轮卡住顶端，往下拉——滋，皮没削下来，苹果上犁出几道浅沟。我调整角度，让刀轮贴紧果皮，重新拉。这回皮出来了，细细一条，断断续续，像一条走得跌跌撞撞的绳子。

削到一半，咔，断了。断掉的皮缩在我手心里，苹果上豁开一道白印。我盯着那道白印，鼻子发酸。妈妈在厨房给我煮面，我连一只苹果都削不好。我把苹果放下，又拿起来。断就断吧，剩下的接着削。

我换了个方向，从断口旁边重新下刀，一圈一圈往下走。这回我不看皮了，看苹果，手稳稳地转。后半只削得意外地顺，皮连上了断头，绕完最后一圈，收刀。苹果黄白黄白的，坑坑洼洼，远看还是只苹果。我把断成两截的皮摆在盘边，摆成两条小船。

我把盘子端出去，放在妈妈的面碗旁边。她说你这是干什么。我说生日蛋糕，没有蜡烛，苹果代替。她看看那只坑洼的苹果，看看盘边的两条皮船，没说话，拿起来咬了一口。我紧张地盯着她的脸。她嚼完，说：这是我吃过最甜的一口。我知道这话有水分，可她的眼睛是湿的。

那晚睡觉前，妈妈进我屋，把一只削得光溜溜的苹果放在我床头——她削的，皮一点没断。她说刀要用推的，别用拉的，明天教我一招。我咬着我那只坑洼苹果剩下的半只，嗯了一声。苹果皮的小船还摆在桌上，月光照着，像真要开往什么地方去。

The Apple Cake on Her Birthday

Mother’s birthday fell on my duty day, and I got home after dark. She was boiling noodles in the kitchen, the flame on the stove jumping. I stood in the doorway with a single apple in my pocket, red-skinned, bought with the pocket money I had saved.

I wanted to peel it for her as a birthday cake. But I had never peeled anything. All my life I had only watched mother turn the apple with one hand and walk the knife with the other, the peel a ribbon that never broke. I had stolen glances a hundred times; my own hands had never practiced once.

I went to my room and shut the door and dug out the peeling knife from art class. Plastic handle, a small serrated wheel for a head. I gripped it, my palm sweating. I braced the apple against the corner of the desk, caught the wheel at the top, and

pulled down. Skrrt. No peel came off; the apple got a few shallow furrows. I changed the angle until the wheel hugged the skin, and pulled again. This time a peel came out, a thin ribbon, broken here and there, like a rope walking with a stagger.

Halfway around, it snapped. The torn peel shrank in my palm, and a white gash opened on the apple. I stared at the gash, my nose stinging. Mother was boiling my noodles in the kitchen, and I could not even peel one apple. I put the apple down. I picked it up again. Broken or not, I would keep going from the break.

I turned the apple the other way and started the knife beside the tear, circling down. This time I did not watch the peel; I watched the apple, and my hand turned it steady. The second half came out surprisingly smooth, the new peel joining the broken end, and when the last circle closed I lifted the knife. The apple was pale yellow, pitted and bumpy, but from a distance it was still an apple. I laid the two broken ribbons of peel on the edge of the plate, like two little boats.

I carried the plate out and set it beside her noodle bowl. She asked what this was for. I said birthday cake, no candles, the apple stands in. She looked at the bumpy apple, looked at the two peel boats, said nothing, picked it up and took a bite. I watched her face while she chewed. She finished and said: the sweetest bite I have ever eaten. I knew that was generous, but her eyes were wet.

Before bed that night, mother came in and left a perfectly peeled apple on my bedside table, peeled by her, the ribbon unbroken. She said the knife should push, not pull, and she would teach me the trick tomorrow. I took another bite of my own bumpy apple and grunted yes. The little peel boats still sat on the desk, lit by moonlight, looking ready to sail somewhere.