清早的第四圈

暑假第一天，妈妈把那辆小轮车搬到楼下空地，说这个假期必须学会。楼下的表哥骑得飞快，绕着花坛一圈接一圈，看得我心里发痒。

爸爸下班回来，袖子还卷着，听完妈妈的话就把车扶正，让我跨上去。他说他扶着后座，我只管蹬。

头一圈他还跟着，第二圈我听见身后妈妈的喊声，一回头，车一歪，摔进了草地里，膝盖破了皮。爸爸蹲下来看，拿随身的手帕给我擦掉膝盖上的草屑。

我坐在草地上生闷气，觉得摔一次就说明我没天分。爸爸没讲道理，只说，再来，这回眼睛看着你要去的方向，别盯着轮子。

再上去那回我骑得小心，两只手死死攥着车把，指节都白了。骑到花坛那儿我就提前捏闸，宁可停下来也不敢拐弯。爸爸说，怕拐弯就慢慢拐，身子别僵。

我盯着花坛对面的那棵柳树，慢慢拐，居然拐过去了。风从耳朵边上过去，我心头一热，差点又歪。

傍晚凉快了接着练。有一回我骑得顺了，得意起来，单手扶把，车头一摆，我整个人从车座上滑下来，屁股墩坐在地上。爸爸这回笑了，笑完还是把我拉起来，说单手的事等学会了再说。

那天晚上我坐在台阶上，看着楼下黑漆漆的空地，跟妈妈说，别人都是天生就会的，我可能就是不会。

妈妈说，你爸小时候在土路上学，摔得比这狠。她说要不明天再试，不试也没人笑话你，就是你自己以后出门只能走路。

隔天清早我起得早，自己把车推到空地。没人扶，我先跨上去，一只脚点地，一圈一圈慢慢蹬。骑到花坛那儿，我提前减速，拐过去了，再往前，又拐了一个。

爸爸上班路过空地，站在栅栏外看了一会儿，没喊我，等我骑完第四圈才竖起一根大拇指，上班去了。

后来我越骑越远，从空地骑到小区门口，又骑回来。上坡蹬得费劲，脸憋得通红，我也没下来推，一寸一寸挪上去了。

开学前那个晚上，表哥来我家，说以后上下学可以一起骑车。我嘴上说有什么了不起，心里早就乐开了花。

那个暑假我摔了很多跤，膝盖上的疤到现在还在。可我记得最清楚的，是清早没人扶的那第四圈。

The Fourth Lap in the Early Morning

On the first day of summer vacation, my mother wheeled the small-wheeled bicycle

down to the open ground below our building and said I had to learn it that summer, no excuses. My cousin upstairs rode like the wind, round and round the flower bed, and it made my heart itch to watch.

My father came home from work with his sleeves still rolled up, listened to my mother, then straightened the bicycle and told me to swing my leg over. He said he would hold the back of the seat and I only needed to pedal.

On the first lap he still followed. On the second lap I heard my mother calling from behind, turned my head, and the bicycle tipped, dropping me into the grass with a scraped knee. My father crouched to look and wiped the grass bits off my knee with a handkerchief he always carried.

I sat in the grass sulking, convinced that one fall proved I had no talent. My father offered no grand reasoning, only: again, and this time keep your eyes on where you want to go, not on the wheels.

When I got back on, I rode carefully, both hands gripping the handlebar so hard my knuckles turned white. Whenever I reached the flower bed I squeezed the brake early, preferring to stop rather than risk the turn. My father said, if you are afraid of turning, turn slowly, and do not stiffen your body.

I stared at the willow tree across from the flower bed, turned slowly, and actually made it past. The wind brushed past my ears, my chest warmed, and I nearly wobbled again.

In the cool of the evening we kept practicing. Once I was riding smoothly and got showy, steering with one hand; the front of the bicycle swung, and I slid right off the seat and landed on the ground. This time my father laughed, but after laughing he still pulled me up and said one-handed riding could wait until I had truly learned.

That night I sat on the steps looking at the dark open ground downstairs and told my mother that other people were born knowing how to ride, and I was probably just one of the kids who never could.

My mother said that when your father was a boy he learned on a dirt road and fell far harder than this. She said we could try again tomorrow, and that if I did not try, nobody would laugh at me — I would simply have to walk everywhere for the rest of my life.

The next morning I got up early and pushed the bicycle down to the open ground myself. Nobody was holding it. I swung one leg over, kept one foot on the ground, and pedaled around slowly, lap by lap. At the flower bed I slowed ahead of time and turned through it, then went on and turned through another.

My father passed by the open ground on his way to work, stood outside the fence

and watched for a while without calling me, and only after I finished the fourth lap did he raise a thumb and head off to work.

After that I rode farther and farther, from the open ground to the gate of the compound and back. The uphill stretch was hard; my face turned red with effort, but I never got off to push. I moved up it inch by inch.

On the night before school reopened, my cousin came over and said we could ride to school together from now on. I said out loud, big deal, but inside I was already dancing.

That summer I fell many times, and the scar on my knee is still there. But what I remember most clearly is that fourth early-morning lap with nobody holding on.