巷子两头的下午

老屋门前的巷子又直又长，青石板被几代人的脚磨得发亮。女儿六岁生日刚过，舅舅把那辆带辅助轮的小车拆了轮子，推到巷口，说就在巷子里学，两头我守着。

头一个下午她摔了四回。第一回磕在门槛石上，小腿青了一块；第二回连人带车栽进巷边的浅水沟，裤腿全是泥。我蹲在巷口没动，手在心里掐着自己的手腕。她坐在泥里哭，哭完自己把车从沟里拖出来，冲我喊，爸爸你过来看看车坏没坏。我走过去，只把车把给她摆正，其余让她自己来。

舅舅在另一头看不下去，说你这当爹的怎么当的。我说，手一伸，她就知道有退路；今天不扶，是让她知道没有退路，但有人看着。这话我说得生硬，其实是说给自己听的——当爹的手比谁都痒。

第二个下午她只在拐弯处摔了一回，掌根蹭破点皮，吹一吹又骑。巷子两头的门都开着，邻居递出来半块创可贴，她接过去自己贴，贴歪了也不管。我忽然发现，巷子里的大人孩子都默认了一件事：摔了，先自己起来。

到第三个下午，我在巷口假装看手机，眼睛全在镜片的余光里。她骑得越来越快，风把她的头发掀起来。我这才反应过来，从第二个下午起，我就没再碰过那辆车。放手不是某个时刻的决定，是手一点一点、自己松开的。

她骑到巷口，捏闸，脚点地，抬头冲我笑，露出缺了半颗的门牙。她说，爸爸，我摔了五回，骑了六回，我赢了。我点头，说这个算法对。

晚上她妈给她擦药，问她怕不怕。她说怕，但是摔完了车还在，爸爸还在巷口，就不怕了。我在门外听见，没接话。原来孩子把大人的忍看得明明白白，她不需要手，她需要的是巷口那个人不走。

后来女儿上学、骑车上学、骑车过天桥，摔过也摔得少了。我常想起巷子那头的下午，想起自己掐着手腕的样子。教孩子骑车，教的其实不是车，是让他相信：摔了能起来，起来还有人接着看。

The Afternoons at Both Ends of the Lane

The lane in front of the old house was straight and long, its blue stone slabs polished bright by the feet of several generations. Right after my daughter turned six, her uncle removed the training wheels from the small bike and pushed it to the mouth of the lane, saying she would learn right here, with one of us watching at each end.

On the first afternoon she fell four times. The first time she hit the threshold stone and her calf turned blue; the second time she and the bike toppled into the shallow ditch beside the lane, and her trouser legs were covered with mud. I squatted

at the lane mouth and did not move, pinching my own wrist from inside my hands. She sat in the mud and cried, then dragged the bike out of the ditch by herself and shouted to me, Dad, come see whether the bike is broken. I walked over, straightened the handlebars for her only, and let her do the rest.

Her uncle could not stand it from the other end and said, what kind of father are you. I said, if I reach out a hand, she learns there is a way back; not helping today is to let her know there is no way back, but someone is watching. I said it stiffly, and it was really said to myself, because a father hands are the itchiest of all.

On the second afternoon she fell only once, at the turning, scraping the heel of her palm a little. She blew on it and rode again. The doors at both ends of the lane were open, and a neighbor handed out half a bandage; she took it and applied it herself, crooked, and did not care. I suddenly noticed that all the adults and children in the lane took one thing for granted: when you fall, get up first by yourself.

On the third afternoon I pretended at the lane mouth to look at my phone, while all my eyes lived in the peripheral vision of the lenses. She rode faster and faster, and the wind lifted her hair. Only then did I realize that since the second afternoon I had not touched that bike once. Letting go is not a decision taken at one moment; it is a hand loosening bit by bit, by itself.

She rode to the mouth of the lane, squeezed the brake, touched the ground with her feet, and looked up and smiled at me, showing the half-missing front tooth. She said, Dad, I fell five times and rode six times, I won. I nodded and said that arithmetic is right.

That evening her mother was applying medicine to her and asked whether she had been afraid. She said yes, but after each fall the bike was still there, and Dad was still at the lane mouth, so she was not afraid. I heard it from outside the door and did not answer. It turns out the child sees the patience of adults perfectly clearly: she did not need a hand, she needed the person at the lane mouth not to leave.

Later my daughter went to school, went to school by bicycle, crossed the overpass by bicycle; she still fell, but less often. I often think of those afternoons at the far end of the lane, and of myself pinching my wrist. Teaching a child to ride a bicycle teaches, in fact, not the bike, but the belief that when you fall you can get up, and when you get up someone is still watching.