

Chapter Four

Flat Head 童年时代的天真(1960-)

When the study group was over, Flat Head took me to his apartment house in our compound. His older brother, who was away that week, had left all his possessions out in his flat, which was next door to the main family apartment, and Flat Head took me in to have a look. It was a fascinating place, littered with all sorts of equipment. Flat Head's manner changed as soon as we walked in. He looked smugly at his brother's 'grown-up toys', and started his guided tour by pointing at a small suitcase-like object.



¹ Flat Head's home (in the early 1960s, it did not have those air conditioning equipment. This photo was taken in 2018

"This is a German tape recorder: *superb* sound," he showed off. He appeared to be slightly disconcerted by some different sized boxes lying scattered on a bench, but continued breezily, "This is my brother's recording and editing equipment. It can be attached to the tape recorder..."

"I've never seen a tape recorder in my life," I declared, staring at the case. "Recording.....that reminds me.... My cousin told me a weird story once. It was about something that's used to make recording tape – a mineral? There was a mountain cave, somewhere in southern Anhui Province, where you could hear gun shots and people screaming when lightning struck the rocks." I paused, and firmed up my recollections. "The local people said that the terrible sounds were recorded in the late 1930s during a thunderstorm, when a Japanese army battalion went into the cave to search for some villagers hiding there. The Japanese army killed every last one of them. Forever afterwards, you could hear the sound of villagers screaming for their lives before being killed." I tried to make the story as mysterious as possible. "That's because the cave wall was covered with the stuff that's used to make recording tape."

"Really?" Flat Head seemed amazed by my story, and stood stock still for a moment. But he soon carried on with his impressive gadget show. He was now gesturing at a black box with some knobs on it, and two large loudspeakers. "This is an amplifying system."

"What does that do?" I asked.

"Don't you know, you idiot? It makes things sound louder and very...bassy. Bassy music. You know, waltzes, one, two, three?" Flat Head began to waltz round the room with affected proficiency. "Amplified sound, bass very loud: oom cha cha, boom cha cha..."

The Young Pioneer Group Leader in me piped up dutifully, "I thought only the bourgeoisie did this sort of thing. We live in a new socialist country now, and it doesn't allow us to do bad kinds of dancing any more."

Flat Head stopped twirling. "OK, OK. Enough! No need to get smart with me. Now, look, this is a very expensive Leica, a German camera, and it's my brother's favourite. Don't you dare put your finger on the lens!"

Flat Head opened a door and switched on a light. The space beyond was immediately bathed in crimson. When I followed Flat Head into the mysterious redness I felt a peculiar sensation and was frightened. What could this place be? I now learned what a dark room was, as Flat Head soon reassured me, explaining that it was used for handling undeveloped films and photo sheets without exposing them under normal light.

We emerged from the redness, and on the other side of the sitting room I spied a workbench, covered with radio tubes and electronic valves. I was by now quite sure that I wanted an elder brother who owned myriads of fascinating things like these. Flat Head was still casting around for more instructions and prohibitions to give me. Although I was still not allowed to touch any of his older brother's possessions, an exception was now made for a gleaming, dark-green, hybrid bike.

"Let's take the bike out for a spin. I'll have the first turn," proposed Flat Head animatedly. "I'll go round the block twice, and then you can have a go, yes?"

The large, high, solid but sporty bike looked extremely intimidating. I simply could not see myself mounting the saddle and riding it, so I tried to sound generous. "It doesn't matter. You go round the block as many times as you like. I can't ride a bike."

"Don't worry! I'll teach you, I promise." Flat Head pushed the bike out through the flat into the lane, and sped off.

Although Flat Head was a head taller than me, the bike saddle was still too high for him. He placed his left foot on the pedal, and pushed his right foot against the ground. The bike started to move forward, slanting heavily. Flat Head immediately stretched his right foot through the triangular frame of the bike to reach the pedal on other side and propel the bike onwards. It was alarming to watch him riding with his body leaning out on the left-hand side of the bike and his bottom nowhere near the saddle. As promised, he went round the block twice, then pushed bike in my direction and asked me to do the same.

“No way; it’s far too high for me to ride. What happens if I fall off?” I asked nervously.

“Don’t worry, you won’t fall off. I’ll be running right behind you. I’ll hold on to the saddle the whole time.”

Flat Head looked at my hopeless face and sought to reassure me. “Why don’t you just put your left foot on the pedal and I’ll give you a push start? All you have to do is concentrate on getting your balance.”

I stood gingerly on the left pedal of the bicycle, full of nervous anticipation, and Flat Head began pushing, ramming his fist into my back. Gradually but inexorably, the bike gained speed, and I sped away from Flat Head, who stuttered out increasingly breathless instructions as I raced ahead and he sprinted to keep up. “If you think you’re going to fall towards the right, turn the handle bar towards the right too; and if you think you’re going to fall towards the left, then turn the handle bar towards the left. Right?”

The lane whirled around me. I was quite incapable of taking in the left and right turnings of Flat Head’s unnatural and illogical bike riding theory. What on earth did he mean? Actually I was more worried about the speed that I was travelling at. The faster we went, the more I lost control. The lane continued to rush and whirl. Inevitably, a huge wobble suddenly overtook me, and I felt myself

careering down towards the right. In the panic of the moment, I pulled the handlebar towards the left, as seemed sensible, but of course the bicycle crashed heavily to the ground, with me on top of it. I staggered to my feet. My right hand was hurting a great deal, but I stooped to pick up the bike. By now Flat Head had caught up with me and was shouting agitatedly.

“You idiot! Why didn’t you remember what I said! Why did you move handlebars to the left when you were falling towards the right? Oh I hope it isn’t wrecked.” Flat Head was now starting to check the bike for damage. “If there’s even the most minute scratch I’ll be in serious trouble with my brother. Come and help me!”

Our nervous initial assessment was followed by a comprehensive and somewhat doom-laden inspection. We discovered that as well as some white scratches on the shiny dark green paintwork, the right-hand pedal was badly distorted. It would have to be replaced. We looked anxiously at each other.

“I know what. I’ll leave the bike lying down in his room. It’ll look as if it’s fallen over by itself and the pedal has got damaged. Promise on your life never to say anything?”

“Of course,” I agreed immediately, only too relieved to be absolved of any responsibility. We rushed to put the bike back. Shortly afterwards, Flat Head was locking the door of his brother’s flat and stealing away from the scene of the crime.

As it was still early, we decided to look for other amusing activities, and took ourselves back outside. As we sauntered round the compound, we overheard a conversation between Ah Santou 阿三头 and his new girlfriend, in apartment house number eleven.

“How come you’ve still got that pear that I gave you last Sunday? Why didn’t you eat it?”

“I will never eat it: I want to save it. It’s in pride of place on my desk. The pear will remind me of you. I really miss you so much when you’re not around.”

Flat Head and I giggled wildly under our breath. “His girlfriend looks like a pear,” I whispered into Flat Head’s ear, “Only Ah Santou would have a girlfriend who looks like a pear.”

Recovering his composure, Flat Head looked at me expectantly and asked, “Shall we play our old game?” I knew exactly what he meant and agreed immediately. “Why not?”

Our version of knock-a-door-run needed careful synchronising, but benefitted from years of practice. At lightning speed, we ran into an apartment house of four flats. I knocked on the doors with odd numbers and Flat Head on the even. We then rushed out into the lane and started walking away slowly and calmly, as if nothing had happened. Delighted with ourselves, we looked innocently back at the people rushing fruitlessly out to open their blank front doors.

We were a creative but naughty pair and had many nefarious ideas for games. On discovering a large quantity of clay in the lane, we turned our mined pile into the basis of an ammunition factory. Hundreds of small clay pellets were manufactured, and were then hardened under the sun. After dark, our catapulting games could commence, and from our secret hiding place the clay pellets could be distributed at force and speed among the passers by. Flat Head and I were a good team. He would squat down behind the wall at one side of our first floor balcony, and I would hide at the other end. He would alert me as soon as he saw a passer by approaching, and would give me an estimate of the distance between whoever it was and me, so that I could get a handful of clay pellets ready to throw down from the balcony. Our hit-rate was remarkably high.

Although the rain of pellets appeared not to hurt anyone, it gave our unfortunate neighbours some nasty surprises in the dark.

On one occasion our game backfired. Flat Head told me that someone was approaching and I got a handful of pellets ready to let loose at the person when he was near enough. As soon as I had thrown my pellets, I realised that the person I had been aiming at was my father.

“Shit! It was my father. I didn’t realise he was coming back early tonight.”

“I’d better go,” whispered Flat Head, rushing down the stairs as Father prepared to come up. He slipped into the darkness before Father could catch sight of his face.

“Who on earth was that, running away so fast?” my father asked as he opened the front door.

“I’ve no idea.” I was already standing in the sitting room. Perplexingly, Father did not mention the pellets that had landed on him.

In the summer, we hunted creatures in Flat Head’s back garden. It was untended and rough, a good breeding ground for wildlife. We loved tracking and trapping whatever we could find, and made good use of our clay supplies to construct differently-shaped pots for our carefully trained fighting crickets. Once it was dark on long hot evenings, we would sit listening out attentively on Flat Head’s back doorstep. Our main aim was to locate the loudest and clearest-singing crickets, and once we knew where they were, we would sidle up quietly with our torches and nets, and bag as many insects as we could. We caught healthy crickets to be our fighter slaves, and subjected them to a strict training scheme. First, we would go through a selection process, by making them fight each other. Only the three strongest fighters would be kept for full training. We would then feed our prize specimens with cooked rice and water before exercising them for

three days: this included teasing with cricket grass, and throwing the trainees high into the air, before catching them in our cupped hands. At the end of the last day of training we would put the much-handled, frightened and confused crickets into a fighting pot, in readiness for the final selection stage. Only the strongest would go through to the Champion of Championships in our lane.

Before the great fight day came, we would feed our strongest fighters with chilli, as this would make them so irritated that they would bite anything that appeared in front of them. By the time of the big contests they would have intimidatingly large bodies, glistening black heads, and vast dark brown fangs. They seemed to know their own power. After winning a battle, they would twitch and snap their back legs and burst into loud victory songs. Flat Head and I were proud of our ruthless training scheme, as it allowed us to win the lane cricket championships several times.

Flat Head's wild back garden also provided us with pet golden beetles in the summer; these were large, round, beautiful insects with deep green, glowing shells. We fed them with watermelons. In the evenings we took them out for a fly in the lane by fastening a thread around their collars, and they would soar above our heads like tiny kites. If they refused to fly we would hold on to the end of the threads and spin them round very fast to force them to take off.