

Chapter One 1960 Dandy Lane Primary School 雨露滋润禾苗壮

After a stormy night, the morning was crisp, sunny and calm. The previous day's sticky and stale atmosphere had been washed away, but twisted branches lay scattered along the streets and pavements, evidence of the violent tempest. An unusually quiet, even solemn atmosphere hung over Shanghai.

As usual, I was standing at the assembly point at the end of China Lane 华村 with half a dozen of my classmates, but, unusually, three of us were in the white shirts and navy-blue trousers of the Young Communist Pioneers 少年先锋队. That morning, my school, Dandy Lane Primary 丹徒路小学, was holding a ceremony to welcome some fourth-year primary pupils into the organisation.

For months I had been longing not only to wear the Young Pioneer uniform, but also to prove that I was one of the most sensible, trustworthy pupils in my class. Now, at last, I would have a red scarf around my neck, like the fifth and sixth-year pupils. My class teacher had even hinted that I might be a Group Leader, allowed to wear a bright red stripe on my left arm. I already felt very different from those who were not joining the glorious organisation that day, and a weighty sense of incipient responsibility matched the heaviness of the Shanghai early summer air.

“Do you want to have a go?”

My dreams of honour and glory were interrupted by Flat Head 扁头. He was breathless, exhausted by practising elaborate skipping tricks. I could almost hear his heart, throbbing like a drum, as he thrust his skipping rope at me.

“No! Anyway, you shouldn't be bringing skipping ropes to school,” I said in an accusing tone. Flat Head was one of my closest friends, but unfortunately, he had not been a good enough boy to join the Young Pioneers that day. “Mrs Dian says she'll confiscate any toys brought into school.”

“Don't be so.....hard, Panda!” he replied, hesitantly. “You aren't a Group Leader yet.” Flat Head wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “I'll hide the rope

in my bag; she won't see it if you don't tell her, will she?" he entreated, as the warm smile began to disappear from his bright red face.

The clock on the wall outside the number 22 trolley-bus terminus now said 7:15. Ignoring Flat Head, I turned to the others. "Er, anyway, it's time to go to school," I declared, as if I were indeed already a Group Leader. "Line up quickly everyone. Let's go!" We crossed the road carefully and marched towards our school, a short walk away.

The teaching block at Dandy Lane Primary was a three-storey red brick building. Each floor had eight large classrooms, four on the south-facing side and the other four on the north, with a long corridor in the middle. Each classroom held fifty to sixty pupils. The school's main playground was large by urban Chinese standards of the time, and there was also a smaller playground with a basketball pitch. On one side of the small playground was an assembly hall where on rainy days we had our PE lessons, usually in the form of table tennis.

The sound of trumpets and drums grew louder as we approached the gate. I had always envied those who had been chosen to play musical instruments, and after school, I often watched them practising their pieces while marching up and down in the playground. Hearing the stirring music now, from a distance, made the band seem more alluring than ever. Deep in another reverie, I now savoured the idea of being a musician.

Suddenly, the drill-like school bell woke me, and I realised that I was standing alone by the school gate, well outside the playground. I was late. I ran to the classroom in a panic, opened my desk lid, threw my schoolbag in, rushed to the assembly hall, and nudged into the queue of classmates.

Although we were all packed in together, nobody uttered a word. We were waiting anxiously for something to happen. The toots and crashes grew louder, soon turning the building itself turned into a huge, reverberating drum. Then the music stopped, and for a split second there was complete, frozen silence. Out of the heavy stillness I heard the choir start singing in a marching rhythm, as clearly as bells.

We are the successors of Communism.

*Following in the glorious tradition of the older generation of revolutionaries
Loving our country and loving our people
Bright red scarves waving in the wind in front of us
We will not yield to difficulties. We are not afraid of enemies.¹*

Marching into the hall, singing their anthem **at the top of their voices**, came the Young Pioneers, holding red flags emblazoned with yellow stars and torches. The welcome ceremony for the new members had begun. We were called up to the stage one by one to have red scarves fastened round our necks by the Young Pioneers' school leader, after which the new members swore their loyalty to the organisation. Coming down from the stage, carefully not displaying my excitement, I re-joined my class line.



As anticipated, I had my red scarf, and one red stripe on my upper left arm. I felt pleased and proud, but at the same time I envied those who had badges with two stripes, as this meant that they had been made committee members for our sixty-strong class.

After the ceremony, the new Young Pioneers walked proudly into the playground.

“You’ve got two red stripes,” I said enviously, staring at Old Leaf’s 老叶子 badge.

“I think yours is better,” he said casually.

“Come off it. How could it be better?”

“Look,” said Old Leaf teasingly as he took off my badge, “it’s easy to turn your badge into a three stripe one. Put an extra stripe at the top, and another at the bottom, and you’ll

¹我们是共产主义接班人，继承革命先辈的光荣传统，爱祖国，爱人民，鲜艳的红领巾飘扬在前胸。不怕困难，不怕敌人，顽强学习，坚决斗争，向着胜利，勇敢前进...

be leader of the whole school! Only joking! Don't worry. It's quite fair, really. They just look at our general performance and behaviour."

"Yes, I know, you always get best marks for everything," I agreed.

"No, not everything. Don't forget, your calligraphy marks are the best in the class. Mr Zheng 郑老师 really likes your writing, so he really likes you too."

"So what! It's just calligraphy. It's just – art."

Flat Head was standing in the hall doorway of the hall listening to our conversation and biting off big chunks of dark chocolate. Hoping to annoy me and get revenge for my bossiness earlier, he now pitched in, agreeing with Old Leaf, "Yes, he likes you Yungyung, so you always get good marks."

"OK, then," I reminded him, "where's your skipping rope?"

"I didn't bring it in. You can search me!" Flat Head looked at me challengingly.

"Come on, you two, stop squabbling," retorted Old Leaf, losing interest and walking off to talk to the others.

In the large sandpit on the east side of the main building some more mischievous boys were showing off their wrestling skills, and the infamous Bendy Leg 跷脚 was demonstrating a few of his new tricks by practising on weaker members of his audience. Bendy Leg was two years older than me. As he had not passed his end-of-year exams for the previous two years, he had ended up in our class. A polio victim, he had problems with his left leg, and could not walk or run properly, but he was the best at wrestling in our class. I had always thought that the reason he was unbeatable in wrestling was because he was older and stronger than the rest of us, so I did not take his tricks that seriously.

"Panda, come over here. Let me show you my new trick, A Chicken Laying Eggs 地孵鸡." He waved me over, gesturing that I was to be his assistant. I was reluctant, so to convince me, he said that I could grab him from behind with both arms, supposedly

preventing any nasty tricks on his part. I thought this might give me the chance to show him that I too was an invincible wrestler, so I rushed at his back and grabbed his waist tightly.

“Are you ready?” Bendy Leg asked, scoffingly.

Before I could answer, his right arm was locked round my neck. Bending his knee, he took a pace forward, pulling down on my head and placing all his body weight on the back of my neck. Inevitably, I lost my grip and fell to the ground. The large crowd cheered and shouted. “Yes, yes, yes, you’ve laid the fourth egg! Come on, Bendy Leg, lay four more! The fourth egg is a Panda. Bendy Leg is invincible!”

With sand on my face and in my mouth I glanced at my brand new white shirt, and noticed that my left elbow was slightly torn. Badly defeated in front of my classmates, completely humiliated, I turned round and went quietly back to our classroom. I was unable to concentrate during the next lesson, as I was worried about the state of my shirt, and about being told off by my parents. If I had only carried on talking to Old Leaf! Salt was added to the wound when I thought of my classmates calling me Panda, and as I remembered how I got this nickname my face reddened. I was still in my second primary year, and just before the end-of-day school assembly I suddenly wanted to defecate, so I hurried to a female cloakroom and sat on a lavatory there. Afterwards, I ran back to the assembly ground with my new hooded duffel coat on. My class teacher Mrs Dian saw me and shouted, “Come on, quickly line up, you big old Giant Panda.” Someone went to tell Mrs Dian that I had used a women’s toilet, and the whole class laughed at me. “Giant Panda, Giant Panda, you went to the girls’ loo, shame on you!”

I was terribly upset. Up to that point, I had never defecated in a public toilet, only at home, and I thought that the cloakroom with private cubicles and sit-down lavatories was for those who wanted to do some serious business. My misunderstanding was based on the fact that the male school cloakroom had no cubicles, only a long trench, which I thought was designed solely for urinating. I could not understand how anyone could defecate into a hole in the ground. Sheltered as I was, I was unaware that most homes in China did not even have toilets in the house, let alone sit-down lavatories.