

## Chapter Three

### **Study hard and reach the sky** 好好学习, 天天向上

Instead of classes in the afternoons, we had study groups 学习小组 of four or five pupils who worked together for a couple of hours at the home of one of the members. During our sessions we were supposed to finish all the homework given for the day, and prepare for the following day's classes. My group consisted of four pupils: two girls and two boys. It always took place in Victoria's flat, which was only a few steps away from my home.



That afternoon Victoria's mother was out of the house, and we were left alone in the kitchen doing our homework. Victoria and I finished first. She was keen to show me round her flat while her mother was away.

---

<sup>1</sup> Victoria's flat was at the end of the lane, on the right.

“Let me show you my home.”

“Are we really allowed to look round?” I hesitated. “I don’t think your mother would be very pleased about this.”

“Don’t worry. She won’t be back for a while. Besides, she won’t mind *you* looking round our flat.” I followed her into the sitting room.

The room was simply furnished with a western-style sofa, chairs and a coffee table, and had a spacious feeling. Most noticeable were two small, framed posters hanging on the wall. One of them was a bearded westerner, kneeling on the ground, with his face raised to the sky and both palms together in front of his chest. A spotlight shone on his face from the heavens. It was my first experience of looking at an oil painting, albeit in poster form. It was so life-like and full of expression, as if the picture were telling me the truth, the only truth.

“Who’s that?” I asked, pointing at the picture.

“Oh, It’s Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

“What Lord?”

“Jesus is the saviour of the world.”

“How come I’ve never heard of him? I thought Chairman Mao was the saviour of China and the world.”

“Yes, Chairman Mao is the saviour of China, but Jesus is the saviour of our spiritual world.”

“But he’s a foreigner. Now I know why everyone in your family has a foreign name!”

“My mother says that if you believe in Jesus and you pray sincerely to him, he will answer your prayers and forgive you.” Looking towards the picture, Victoria spoke in a very sincere tone.

“Why should I be forgiven by him? Anyway, what have I ever done that needs forgiveness?”

“I don’t know. That’s what my mother told me.”

“Do you believe in him?” I was wondering what kind of mysterious power this man must have over people.

“Yes. My mother says if you believe in Jesus, you will go to heaven when you die. Do you believe in him?”

“I don’t know, but I like the idea of going to heaven. Heaven is a better place than earth, isn’t it?”

“Of course it’s better. I’m sure my mother would be very pleased if you believed in Jesus.”

“OK. I believe in Jesus.”

“That’s great! In that case, you aren’t allowed to believe in Buddha.”

“I never said I believed in Buddha. But why can’t I believe in both? Why can’t I believe in anything that I like?”

“Oh, because Jesus and Buddha don’t get on. They might fight each other.” Victoria tried hard to find an answer to my question. She finally decided to change the subject. Pointing at another poster, she said, “Look, this picture is called ‘The Last Supper’”. These people sitting around the table are Jesus’ disciples. They’re having their last supper with Jesus, because Jesus is going to be

sent to gaol after the meal. That one: look! He's betrayed Jesus, but Jesus knows it. Jesus knows everything."

"Was he a Buddhist?"

"No, I don't think so. We'd better go back to the kitchen. I'm sure they've finished their work by now."

Both Victoria and I joined the Young Pioneers on the same day. We were supposed to take more responsibility and look after the others in the group. I suddenly remembered the words of the Young Pioneer anthem, "We are the successors of Communism..."

"Do you believe in Communism then?" I asked Victoria.

"Of course I do."

"If Jesus doesn't like Buddha, does he mind you believing in Communism?" I thought I was so clever to ask her a difficult question. To my surprise, Victoria replied without hesitating.

"Communism is in the real world, but Jesus is in our spiritual world. They don't contradict each other."

We went back to the kitchen and found that Flat Head had already finished his work. He was looking at something underneath the kitchen sink.

"What's he looking at?" I asked.

Victoria started panicking and shouting. "Stop it! Don't look under there!"

"It's so sweet!" Flat Head said with a naughty smile. "It's a nice white rabbit. Can I feed it?"

"No, you're not supposed to see the rabbit."

“Why not?” Flat Head asked

“My mother said we shouldn’t remove the board in the front of the sink. You’re not supposed to know this.”

“Why do you want to keep a rabbit in the dark?” I asked.

“I don’t know! I don’t know!”

“Are you going to eat the rabbit?” Flat Head asked naughtily.

Victoria simply stood stock still, saying nothing.

“If it’s for eating, who will kill it?” I was thinking about my own experience of killing the pet chickens.

“It’s easy to kill a rabbit,” Flat Head said staring at the rabbit.

“Easier than killing a chicken?” I asked.

“Of course! I saw Aqi killing a rabbit the other day. He told me that it wasn’t like killing a chicken. You shouldn’t let the blood come out when you kill it.”

“How do you do it?” I asked.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Poor Victoria covered her ears.

“You hold tight onto its back legs and whack its head against a wall.”

“Would it die immediately?” I wanted to know every gory detail.

Victoria was singing something with both hands covering her ears. The other girl in the group, Jiayin 佳音, was still doing her homework as if nothing was happening.

“You have to whack it hard a few times to make sure,” Flat Head replied, triumphantly.

“Victoria, you still haven’t told us *who’s* going to kill the rabbit?” I asked again. Tears were beginning to flow from her big eyes.

“OK. Let’s stop talking about that.” I dragged Flat Head back to the table. Victoria went to the sink, blocked the bottom part with a piece of board, and came back to sit with us.

For a while the atmosphere was very still. We could not find a new subject to talk about. I was still thinking about the rabbit. Suddenly Jiayin broke the silence.

“I’ve finished!” she announced, closing her notebook and smiling. “Yeah, so what! I finished before you!” Flat Head reacted, automatically.

“I finished it much earlier than you did!” I said, challengingly.

“Have you double checked your answers?” Victoria asked Flat Head.

“There’s no need. I’ve finished. That’s it. I don’t give a damn!”

“You’d better watch out with your maths or you’ll be in trouble again.” I remembered I was supposed to act more responsibly towards Flat Head.

Flat Head grabbed my school bag and tried to find my notebook. “Why don’t you show me your notebook and let me have the right answers?”

“No cheating, or I’m going to tell Mrs Shen,” Victoria shouted.

“Calm down! Calm down! I was only going to borrow a rubber. There’s no need to be so nervous.”

“Rubber? Why do you need a rubber?” I asked.

“I’ll rub out all the wrong answers.”

“How do you know your answers are wrong?”

"I'll soon know if you give me your answers," he whispered, clutching on to my bag.

"It's already three o'clock. I've got go to my mother's work unit." Jiayin had put all her things into her schoolbag and was ready to leave.

"OK, let's go," Flat Head dropped my bag and was heading for the door. "Why don't you come round to my place? My brother's left his bike at home and I can teach you to ride it, how about that?" He went on. "I've also got a secret plan. It's going to be fun!" Flat Head's mischievous eyebrows went up, and he looked at me hopefully.

As I still had at least two more hours to kill before Mother came home, and I was longing to riding a bike., Flat Head's invitation was simply irresistible.