

## **Intro**

Tara wasn't the type of girl to write "Call me back ASAP!! EMERGENCY!!!" in a text message.

Tara wasn't the type at all. She was cool.

When my bi-weekly music column in her magazine turned into a constant tirade on the Chinese government, she quietly dealt with the local Shanghai officials who questioned her, calmly explained to me that what I was writing could get everyone into trouble, and asked if I could just stick to writing about bands. When we turned into something more than just editor/writer and I politely waited until she had left the country to move-in with some girl I'd met while doing cocaine in a club toilet, she met me for coffee and explained how it had hurt her feelings and that while we would always be friends, there would be nothing more now. No raised voices, no thrown glasses, just a grown-up conversation.

She even paid for the coffees.

Simply put, Tara was not a girl who freaked out. Ever. And she certainly wasn't a girl who sent urgent text messages to someone in the middle of his self-imposed Southeast Asian sabbatical.

So, when I found myself standing in an Indonesian Post Office line, hands full of cheap Christmas gifts I'd pass off as expensive relics and I received that message, I freaked out.

I freaked out because Tara seemed to be freaking out. And if Tara freaks out, then you know shit has hit the fan.

And shit had, most definitely, hit the fan.

When you're waiting in line to send some of the strong black Javanese *kopi* back home to your father in Oklahoma, the thought that maybe the Chinese Police are after you isn't something that crosses your mind – even mine. And I thought pretty highly of myself and my newest project – an underground pre-Olympics China expose showing on Current TV, “The Shanghai Diaries.”

When you're wondering if an orange sarong might be too feminine a gift for your little brother, you don't expect a call from your landlord telling you the “government man goes to your house and takes things.”

And when you've got a man on a rickshaw waiting outside for you to go explore some town in the middle of Indonesia, you'd never think to hear that your best friend, who had done nothing except give an interview on one of the shows you produced, has been forced to run and hide in the Philippines.

These are not the normal circumstances one comes to expect even after half-a-decade in one of the most evil places in the world. And for anyone who's lived there, a lot of crazy becomes expected.

I'd been in China for a little more than five years and I had produced media for four of those. There had been plenty of *misunderstandings* during these years but it had always been a matter of handing someone some amount of money to turn and walk away. But that wasn't going to work this time. From the sounds of it, there were more than a dozen officials after me and that was the kind of money I didn't have.

“You'll never come back,” laughed Alex, my closest friend, on the night before I left for vacation. “You're gonna get to Thailand, realize this place is fucking toxic and just never come back.”

I would have loved to not come back, but I'd said that a hundred times before – we all had. Yes, it was a horrible and disgusting place to live, but in the time I had been there a nice little life had been carved out - I was working a total of no more than 10 hours a week, and even then the work was done by either my personal assistant, my producer or one of my two maids. My apartment was on the roof of an art house with the only other neighbor being Alex. He also didn't need to work much because he was a well-known music producer there and the few people who were actually good at what they did lived the life in this town. Even the people who weren't good at their jobs still did pretty well.

But we... we had it made. Most days began around 10 a.m. spent with coffee and Motown records out on the terrace overlooking Shanghai and most days ended with a bottle of something strong and old funk records. Both seemed to stretch long enough to usually overlap.

Plus, there was money. A lot of money, at least towards the end. In fact, 2007's money had lasted me well into 2008, which meant I didn't have to do much and I could still afford to pay my people well. I could fly to Australia on a whim. I could buy Ecstasy in packs of 100. And I could throw money into an art studio that I only invested in to impress girls.

And there were girls – a lot of girls. Sex became more of an afterthought. At least for the white guys there.

Drugs as well. Vicodin when you woke up. Hash either in or with your second cup of coffee. Percocet all through the afternoon. Cocaine at night. MDMA whenever.

It was all a part of the process - this was expected of us. We were all in the *biz* - a charlatan group of painters, writers, producers, filmmakers, photographers, graphic novel artists and musicians. Not one magazine came out each week that didn't have at least one of us on it – sometimes even the cover.

I had the most popular and controversial magazine column in the country. My show highlighting the local live Chinese music scene, *GigShanghai*, was being talked about in virtually every circle. I also had the internationally famous podcast, *ChinesePod*, under my producer's belt and when *Time Magazine* puts it on their Top 10 for the year [2006], you pretty much get to dictate how everything goes afterwards. My hourly rate went from \$20 to \$200 overnight. My phone calls went from giving boring interviews to the local reporters to answering questions from MSNBC. According to one newspaper article, I was "Leading the Creative Rebirth" and I even forgot to call back the BBC who had emailed me about doing a piece on my work.

The BBC! I just... well, forgot.

Add to that, I had recently been hired by a start-up to put together a team of hosts for an entire radio station making me the first foreign program director in the history of China – at 31 years of age. A spin-off from *ChinesePod* entitled "The Saturday Show" had been getting half-a-million hits a month which resulted in my being recognized everywhere from London to Chicago and now, my newest project, a show on what the Chinese government was *really* doing in preparation for the 2008 Olympics, was gaining serious momentum on both the U.S. and European cable channels.

Not too bad for a college dropout from Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Did I want to leave this horrible country? Yes. Any one of us, had we been able to do what we were doing in any other place, would have.

It was a crowded and dirty country with spitting and shitting and pushing and staring, along with the complete ignorance that comes from two billion people refusing to have their own opinion about what was *actually* happening in their own country, but we simply numbed ourselves to that – with whatever we could get our hands on.

We were rich and we were famous. At least that's what we thought at the time.

So, to know that one tiny incident at the zoo suddenly made me throw it all in, you know it must have been bad.

It was the ducks. This Chinese man spat on the ducks. And I lost it.

It might have been the vicious hangover I was battling. It might have been the fact that the gorgeous correspondent from Italy on this press junket with me had gotten up in the middle of the sex we were having the night before, and had walked out with no explanation. It might have been the fact that I now had to spend the day with her and four others touring ridiculous Chinese places-of-interest. It could have been a number of things.

But whatever it was, whatever triggered it, I lost it.

I mean, completely lost it.

One of those out-of-body episodes usually reserved for big-budgeted films where the camera zooms in and pulls back at the same time.

He spat right on the ducks - this fuck - because he wanted to take their photo and they weren't looking. They wouldn't turn around and look at him, so he loudly cleared his throat and spat right on them.

It all just kind of collapsed in on me right then and there.

I called him every bad word I could remember in Mandarin, told the tour guide I was done and walked away.

I hated this repulsive place and I needed to get out.

The people - the ridiculously unaware people - were too much. The facade that was about to be the 2008 Beijing Olympics was too much. The late-night knocks on our door by the "officials" were too much. The foreign reporters being beaten up were too much. Friends being thrown in prison were too much.

China had finally gotten to be too much.

Shanghai was my home, but I needed to get away from it - at least for a while. I needed to leave until it all quieted down or I was going to lose the entire plot. I'd come back when the Olympics were over... when all of this calmed down ... when Westerners could go back to being the powerful and respected people we deserved to be.

I'd go travel for a while, then I'd come back.

And that's what I had decided.

The Chinese Government would *slightly* disagree.