

2 Patient Zero

Tianjin, China, August 7, 2008

Ma Liang finished reading his briefing papers and set them down on the small round table in front of him. He turned in the chair and looked out the window, south over the Beijing skyline, from the thirty-second-floor window of the Olympic Games volunteers' dormitory. The evening sky was unusually clear, so clear in fact that he could see for almost a kilometer across the fourth ring expressway and the Yuan Dynasty City Wall all the way to the three-tiered roof of the Drum Tower.

The small, trim young man, known by his western name of Tommy, was all ready for the beginning of the games in the morning, and at something of a loss about what to do for the rest of the evening. His roommate hadn't arrived yet, and he wondered whether he should wait for him or go for a walk around the grounds. He grimaced and put his hand to his stomach. He must have nervous jitters, he thought to himself, because his stomach was feeling a little unsettled. Tommy coughed and moved his hand to cover his mouth. He decided to re-read his instructions for the big day to calm himself.

He had just picked up the papers from the table when he heard a thump as something dropped outside in the hall, and then a fumbling with the door knob. He turned to look as the door burst open and a leather bag flew into the room, tumbling to a stop on the floor. It was followed by a lanky young man dragging a large suitcase. He had a long overcoat slung over the other arm and a cigarette clenched between his teeth. He was about six feet in height and dressed in a modern black suit, a pink shirt, open at the neck, and shiny black boots. His hair was tousled, giving Tommy the impression that he had just got out of bed, and a strong aroma of his cologne issued into the room in accompaniment. Tommy coughed, again covering his mouth with his hand, and excused himself.

The young man grinned as he spied Tommy, dropped the suitcase and coat where he stood, and strode over to the chair, removing the cigarette as he did, and extending his hand.

"Kenny Feng!" he declared, launching Tommy out of his seat with a vigorous handshake. "Good to meet you!" He replaced the cigarette and puffed once before releasing Tommy's hand.

"Uh, Ma Liang," Tommy replied, surprised by the familiar manner and the use of the western name and style that put the family name last. "Tommy," he elaborated.

“Tommy!” Kenny repeated, quickly scanning the room. “Nice place we’ve got, don’t you think?” he said and laughed. “‘Mao Modern’ I would call it. Where are you from, Tommy?” he said, looking back at him as he waited for the answer.

“Tianjin.”

“Aah! Wèizǔzi!” Kenny declared gleefully, bending slightly at the knees and jabbing the air with his index finger. “Are you related to Ma Sanli?”

Tommy cringed at the association. There was a stereotype of people from Tianjin as being eloquent, humorous, and open. The term Wèizǔzi, meaning literally “Tianjin-mouth”, was a common misconception in China, and one not helped by the late comedian, Ma Sanli, who played up the stereotype as a caricature on popular Chinese television. “No, but he was very funny,” Tommy said politely.

“Well spoken!” Kenny nodded with satisfaction. “We’ll get along just fine. Which cell is mine?” he asked.

“Yours is that one,” said Tommy, pointing to the empty bedroom on the opposite side of the apartment to his.

“Good.” Kenny dragged his suitcase into the room.

Tommy picked up the overcoat and leather bag and followed him, pushing the apartment door closed as he walked by. “I don’t think smoking is allowed in the dormitory,” he said softly. “It’s in the briefing.”

“What? Oh, I haven’t got that. Just barely made it past the guards!” He laughed again.

“But your key, and your pass ...”

“Got them sent over to the reception hall. Couldn’t get away until now.” Kenny heaved the suitcase onto the bed and leaned over to place the cigarette on the desk, the burning end suspended over the carpet.

Tommy looked at it, and then back to Kenny who was now pulling handfuls of clothes from his open suitcase and placing them in piles on the closet shelves.

“Where are you from?” Tommy ventured to ask.

“Shanghai. My father got me this gig so I could meet some big stars.”

“You mean the athletes?”

“No, celebrities. I’m working in protocol reception.”

Tommy glanced at the cigarette. Smoke curled up into the air as the smoldering tip burned closer to the desk. “I don’t understand,” said Tommy.

Kenny closed the suitcase, slid it under the bed, and plunked himself down, testing the mattress. He reached over for the cigarette and took a puff. “My father is a merchant—shoes, clothing, that kind of thing,” he explained, exhaling. “Celebrities come here to be seen at the Olympics because that’s part of the agreement for endorsing our products. I’ll see David Beckham tomorrow,” he said proudly and placed the shortened cigarette precariously on the desk again. “What are you here for?”

Tommy pried his eyes away from the cigarette and replied. “Swimming. I mean, my job is to supervise the volunteers at the National Aquatic Center who guide the spectators.”

“You mean crowd control. Very important job. We don’t want any stampedes!” He laughed.

Tommy glanced again at the cigarette as it burned perilously close to the desktop. Before he could say anything, Kenny jumped up, casually grabbing it as he walked past.

“Excuse me Tommy. I’ve got to have a leak.” Kenny strode out of the room, taking a final puff on the cigarette.

Tommy heard the sharp extinguishing hiss as Kenny tossed the butt into the toilet.

Kenny relieved himself noisily. “I’m having some things delivered tomorrow morning around ten,” he called over his shoulder. “Will you be around?”

“I have to be at the National Aquatic Centre at seven,” Tommy called back.

There was the sound of the toilet flushing and the water running in the sink. Kenny called over this combined sound. “Wow! Seven o’clock in the morning?”

Tommy wandered into the sitting room. “Yes, our breakfast times are six to six-thirty and seven to seven-thirty. It’s in the briefing. It takes me twenty-two minutes to walk to the Aquatic Centre so I will eat at six o’clock and leave here at six thirty.”

“Never happen,” Kenny replied as he exited the washroom. “I was worried about being up by ten.” He stopped and smiled. “Nervous?”

“A little.”

“Don’t be. You’ll be fine.”

Tommy wondered. Maybe it was the cigarette smoke or maybe he really was nervous, but he felt a distinct nausea. He excused himself and went to bed, ready for the opening day of the Beijing Olympics.

Tommy and the other four professional volunteers met with their director at seven in the morning in the planning room of the National Aquatic Center, a venue dubbed the “Water Cube”

because of the three thousand irregularly shaped, blue-hued bubbles that made up the exterior membrane of the structure.. They were all similarly dressed in dark blue, short-sleeved shirts and khaki-colored trousers to identify them as supervisors, except the director who was distinguished by a handsome red shirt. He gave them each the day's schedule and gathered them together in front of a board showing the events for the day. He reviewed the duties of each of them. The other supervisors were responsible for security, liaison with the media, liaison with the judges, and coordination of the athletes and coaches.

Tommy's nervousness had increased, though, and along with the nausea he had now developed a headache. The briefing took three quarters of an hour, and he tried to ignore the discomfort and muffle his occasional coughs as the director talked. The meeting ended with the director emphasizing the importance of the work they were doing and the pride that they should feel in representing their country.

Tommy felt privileged and a little bit awed to be part of such an eminent group. He thought of his wife and young son back home in their tidy little bungalow on the outskirts of the sprawling city of Tianjin. They were so proud of him, and he wanted to bring honor to his family, especially to his father who shared their home. Tommy's opportunity to attend the Tianjin University of Technology and become the manager of a textiles factory was a reward for his father's ingenuity. His father had worked for the Flying Pigeon Bicycle Company in Tianjin. Plummeting sales almost destroyed the operation, but his father had foreseen the demand for options other than the ubiquitous black, single-speed Chinese bicycle.

The company had closed down its old factory in central Tianjin and moved to a new site on the outskirts of the city. His father had spearheaded the modernization of the design and manufacturing processes to now make bicycles of many colors and with dozens of options, an approach unheard of at the Flying Pigeon of yesterday. Sales of these affordable bicycles bearing the company logo—a stylized “FP” surmounted by a pigeon in flight—were now increasing in China and through exports to over twenty countries in Asia and abroad. The renewal of the company's fortunes had resulted in profit-sharing for his father, recognition by the Party and, for his only son, the funding of a university education.

During the morning, Tommy spent his time with the other supervisors at their glassed-in observation station, and from time to time circulated among his teams. He oversaw 200 young men and women, identified by their light blue tops and khaki trousers or skirts, to manage the crowds of spectators. He walked around the facility and up and down the four levels of seating a number of

times, so by the afternoon he was not surprised to find that he was becoming tired. He was happy that the group had not had any serious problems and sat for a while to rest.

A cheer erupted and Tommy looked out through the glass at the crowd. Everyone appeared to be having a wonderful time in this incredible facility. He gazed again at the water-like cellular structure of the blue ceiling and walls, and marveled at the comfortable, spring-like temperature and humidity that gave it a womb-like feeling. Someday people would marvel at *his* achievements, maybe helping to build jets at the new Air Bus factory, he thought to himself. Tommy's day concluded with a debrief with his group, including a rousing address to prepare them for the next day, and his report to the director. By the end, he was exhausted. He returned to the dormitory by six-thirty for his appointed meal time and then retired to his room.

Kenny arrived at about seven in the evening to find Tommy asleep in one of the chairs. "Hey, Wèizūizi!" he called as he walked in. "What a day, ya?"

Tommy stirred and opened his eyes. "Yes," he replied sleepily and coughed.

"What a day!" Kenny repeated as he pulled at his necktie with one hand and at the same time bent over and peeled off one of his shoes. "So many people!" he exulted, straightening up, holding his shoe in one hand, spreading his arms wide in the air, and throwing back his head to elaborate on the statement. He dropped his hands to his sides, smiling broadly at the memory. "How about you?" he asked Tommy.

"Maximum capacity of seventeen thousand," Tommy replied, standing up with some difficulty. His knees and ankles ached and his back was stiff.

"Ha ha!" Kenny laughed. "Such a comedian!"

Tommy smiled and tried to show humor, when all he really felt was weak.

Kenny clumped over with his one shod foot and slapped him on the shoulder. "Are you coming to the opening ceremonies?" he asked enthusiastically.

"I am not invited," said Tommy.

"Too bad," said Kenny with only slightly reduced enthusiasm. "I will be sitting with the VIPs. So many people!" he repeated and retreated to his room, dropping his shoe as well as his jacket as he went.

Tommy followed, carefully avoiding the clothes. He was surprised to see the wardrobe of suits, shirts, trousers, and shoes now neatly arranged in the closet. He suspected that someone else was responsible for that.

Kenny was busily going through them, selecting pieces and tossing them onto the bed. He undid his trousers and dropped them to the floor, disengaged the other shoe and kicked the heap aside. "Number eleven, Yao Ming, will be here tomorrow!" Kenny enthused. "I used to watch him play with the Shanghai Sharks. He's doing a Reebok appearance for us."

Yao had had surgery on his foot in March and had been cleared to play for the Chinese basketball team. Tommy tried to muster some interest. "You are very lucky. Yao is an excellent ambassador."

Kenny pulled off the shirt and tie together over his head and they fell at his feet. He sprayed more cologne onto his chest and then rubbed both hands around in it, rubbed his hands together, and then drew them a couple of times along both sides of his neck.

Tommy covered his mouth as he coughed again.

Kenny undid the top button of a clean shirt, slid it off its hanger and pulled it on over his head. "And that makes you, me, China, Reebok, and Coca-Cola very happy," he said with a smile. He sorted out the shoes, socks, jacket, and trousers from the bed and put them on. "What a country. Where else in the world has a country gone from feudalism, to the height of communism, and then to the height of capitalism in a generation? We have everything we could possibly need," he said as he admired himself in the mirror.

"Except a belt," Tommy reminded him.

"What? Oh, yes." Kenny looked around among the heaps on the floor and extracted the belt from the trousers. "Thanks Tommy," he said and put it on. Then he put forward his hand, shaking Tommy's warmly. "Get some sleep. You look tired." He picked up a fresh pack of cigarettes from the desk and tore it open, popping one into his mouth and lighting it before stuffing the remainder into his jacket pocket and dashing away.

Tommy did not feel better for the night's sleep. In fact, he felt much worse. He managed to stifle the coughs during the director's briefing and was able to deliver his inspirational talk to his group in the morning, but he could not walk around the venue during the day. Walking left him short of breath and the other supervisors at his station remarked that he looked exhausted. Tommy slumped into a chair in despair and coughed without control. Someone brought him tea which lifted his spirits but did nothing to stop the pounding in his head.

He lasted until the afternoon, but by then he was ravaged by fever. What a time to get so sick, he thought. He stood and started to leave the supervisors' area, determined to seek help at the

medical station and then return to his post. After only a few paces a wave of vertigo swept over him and he gripped the railing to steady himself. People were talking to him but he couldn't hear over the noise in his head. Tommy forced himself forward, hand over hand, thinking of things he loved – his father, wife, and son, his beloved golden chicken he called Luck, and his late mother – as he struggled to remain upright. He staggered on a few more painful steps before slumping to the ground and rolling onto his back, gasping. A crowd of people gathered around him. What a wonderful pattern, he thought, as the bubbles swam around in his vision. That was the last thing he would see.