

Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest
Shortlisted Entry
Pack your Bags! By Ruth Stott, South Africa

"Sawadee kaa!" Khun Amporn placed her sensitive, artistic fingers and beautiful palms together. Her winsome smile was warm and welcoming. With a charming wai, she beckoned Jenna into the massage sala at the Habitat of Absolute Tranquility. It faced the sea and she could hear the gentle swish of the surf, as the waves broke and retreated on the white, sandy beach. The massage table was adorned with flamboyant, cerise-coloured orchids and delicate, waxy frangipani. There was an alluring aroma of lemon grass and citronella.

Jenna snuggled her face into the warm, cuddly towel. Amporn's fingers and hands soon set to work with incredible strength and dexterity. In the background Jenna could hear birds chirping and a brook murmuring. She felt her weary body start to relax. She drifted off to the soothing strains of Chamras Saewataporn's Green Music for peace and inner healing.....

Jenna knew she had made the right decision to come to Thailand. An intimate boutique hotel on Kata Beach had been the perfect choice for a woman on her own. In the next ten days, it was to become a place of hope and renewal for Jenna....A haven of peace and a warm, tropical oasis, where slowly but surely, she would feel her joy and confidence returning.

Jenna Ogden was well and truly wedged in a mid-life British rut. She could feel the unwelcome pounds piling on. Her life had become grey and monotonous, like the cold, clammy mist that swirled round her grey, stone house at night. It was nearly four years now since James had packed his bags and left. All she had left to remember him, was his curt note on the fridge saying, "It's all over Jenna. Don't try to find me. Just do your best to understand me. I have decided to make a life with Carl in Switzerland."

Right now Jenna felt alone. Desperately alone, unwanted, unloved, and unappreciated. James had turned his back on Jenna and found his happiness and fulfillment in a warm and nurturing relationship with Carl. With a secure I.T. Company income behind them, he and Carl were revelling in the peace and beauty of a shared life in an idyllic fairy-tale Alpine village.

Her only son, Nick, had long-since flown the nest. How she envied the outdoor life of sunshine and adventure which he and his young family enjoyed in South Africa. Although his frequent invitations to visit him in far -off Johannesburg were warm and genuine, Nick's stories of violent crime, hi-jacking, rape and corruption had frightened Jenna.

Sensing his Mum's despair and anguish, Nick had very generously offered Jenna a 10-day Thai break as a Christmas gift. Her first glimpse of Kata Beach left her gasping....Her eyes met with a riot of colour, as hundreds of brightly-coloured yachts jostled and bobbed in the bay, awaiting the start of the King's Cup Regatta. Jenna had never before experienced an ocean as brilliantly blue as the azure waters of the Andaman that lapped at her toes. She revelled in the silkiness of the fine, powdery white sand and rejoiced in the warmth of the sunshine on her shoulders.

She was fascinated by the intriguing little pubs and shops that beckoned to her all along the beach promenade. This was indeed a Land of Smiles. Jenna was instinctively drawn to these warm-hearted Thai people who all welcomed her with a beaming "Sawadee!" She felt them reaching out to her in love and acceptance. Jenna felt safe and unthreatened, even daring to eat in restaurants all on her own. She was enchanted by the many new and exciting Thai culinary treats. She had never imagined herself eating curried noodles for breakfast, yet within days, Khanom Chin had become a firm favourite. She found it heartening to discover that many fellow, solitary travellers chose The Boathouse on Kata Beach, as their frequent, favoured holiday destination.

It was a long time since Jenna had felt so pampered. As she curled up in her beach lounger, with a tinkling glass of iced water beside her, she glanced around her. She loved the cluster of cheerful red umbrellas which marked the private beach. How she wished she had the courage to paraglide and soar high above the waves, dipping and diving like the gulls. Happy chattering toddlers frolicked and splashed nearby. As the high tide crept closer and closer, a cheery Japanese family worked assiduously to complete their impressive sand castle. Their chubby toddler giggled and gurgled as the waves swirled round him in the moat. A group of masked and flippered snorkelers scattered to make way for a colourful longtail boat bursting with exuberant Chinese tourists. Jenna was fascinated by the number of foreign languages she heard spoken within range of her lounger. Truly, this resilient Land of Smiles had made a valiant recovery since the Boxing Day tsunami and was eager to welcome the World back to its sunny shores.

How Jenna envied the shapely bronzed bodies stretched out around her. A statuesque Scandinavian with platinum hair strolled along the shore-line, sporting a slinky burnt-orange tanga. The sun seemed to kiss her pert, youthful breasts.

Jenna glanced down at her own body. She was embarrassed by her pale, flabby rolls and the dimpled orange peel on her thighs. Instinctively she snuggled deeper into the folds of her beach sarong and retreated behind her dark glasses and her glossy magazine. She felt her bare feet tapping to the rhythmic beat of "Let's Pack our Bags." As the uplifting summer holiday refrain drifted across the beach from the nearby Reggae bar, Jenna was glad that she had packed her bags and chosen Thailand for her summer vacation.

In a few short days, Jenna had grown to love the throbbing reggae beat. So often the words seemed to pulse in tune with her heart beat. It shocked and saddened her greatly to hear in the little beach bar that one of the world's best-loved reggae artists, Lucky Dube, had been murdered senselessly in a botched hijacking in Johannesburg. Sometimes life is so unjust and so cruel. Her heart went out to Lucky's family. They had been robbed of such a special father and husband. In many ways, Jenna felt she could identify with Lucky Dube's family. After all, hadn't Carl robbed her of James? James and Carl had snatched from her the joy of a warm and loving partnership.

Jenna nibbled on a skewer of chilled watermelon. Two courteous "beach boys" in smart blue and white sailor outfits jumped to attend to the every whim of the hotel guests, re-filling glasses and flicking sand off loungers.

Suddenly, a warm, moist feeling under her left foot rocketed Jenna out of her chair. She chuckled aloud as she realized that one of the stray Kata beach dogs had come to investigate a few spilled potato crisps beneath her seat. Jenna reached out to make pals with the friendly mutt. Before she could restrain him, the overly affectionate pooch had leapt right into her ample lap, knocking her floppy beach hat, her sun glasses and her Haagen Dazs ice cream flying. He proceeded to share his fleas with her as he smothered her in licks and wet kisses.

The next few days passed all too swiftly in joyous abandon.....She felt her energy and strength coming back. Jenna mustered sufficient courage to join fellow guests on exciting daily excursions. She surprised herself by attempting an elephant trek through the rubber plantations, followed by a bare-back buffalo ride up the mountainside. She enrolled for Chef Tummanoon's exciting Thai cooking course, then two days later, learnt how to produce a beautiful batik.

The following day she climbed aboard a Tuk-Tuk with an enthusiastic bevy of happy shoppers. Soon her favourite haunt for pottering and bartering was Thalang Road. Here she chatted to merchants who still sold household goods highly-desirable fabrics and irresistible Thai silks in the same buildings their families occupied over 100 years ago!

It was whilst negotiating a transaction for a simple heart-burn and acidity potion with Mrs. Sodsri Bumrungwong in her well-renowned Guan Choon Tong Herbal store, that Jenna swung round when she heard a broad Scots' accent. The accent belonged to a very rotund, pink-faced Scot, enquiring about a remedy for his "Verrrry perrrrsistent perrrrnicious anaemia." Andy Mac Bean was overjoyed to find that Jenna too was a lone traveller and first-time visitor to Phuket.

Anaemia and heart-burn soon forgotten, Jenna and Andy headed off to The Green Man to share a traditional English Sunday roast at this charming British pub. They shared a life- time of experiences and both travellers regretted that Jenna would be

leaving Thailand in two days' time. They sipped mango and ginger smoothies and downed thirst-quenching Singha beers until dusk.

As they parted, Andy chivalrously gave his new friend a light peck on the cheek. As the sun dipped into the ocean of molten gold, Andy persuaded Jenna to join him for her last day, on Khun Wong's Intrepid Island Hopping excursion. It included the infamous Hongs of Phang Nga by sea canoe!

Jenna giggled nervously in the dark. They were instructed to lie flat. She nestled close to Andy. He had admitted that he too, hated the dark and was claustrophobic. Their large frames filled the slim red rubber canoe. Fortunately their efficient young Thai guide, Khun Anuman, was lightly built and gallantly wedged himself in the stern.

Out in the blinding sunshine again, Jenna was overwhelmed by the stark beauty of the knife-edged limestone cliffs which rose from the emerald sea and towered above them. She gasped as they slipped in and out of islands, honeycombed with eerie caverns and aquatic grottos. She felt secure with Andy's legs squeezed alongside her. He cradled her head between his knees. As their canoe slid silently into the tiny tunnel leading to Cave of the Bats, there was a loud, unnerving hissing sound as air escaped.....

Andy grabbed Jenna in panic, fearing that their combined mass might have punctured the canoe.

"No problem!" re-assured Khun Anuman. "You two be velly big for hong, so I make boat smaller."

Andy and Jenna held their breath as their ample tums narrowly missed the roof of the cave.

After slipping soundlessly in and out of the James Bond caves and gliding between the mangrove forests, Jenna and Andy were relieved to see daylight again. They were rewarded with a scrumptious wok cashew stir fry lunch on Panjee Island. A brief siesta followed... They happily placed their grass mats side by side and drifted off in the shade of a verdant coconut palm.

It had been an unforgettable day for both Jenna and Andy. Although pleasantly weary from the fresh air and the sunshine, they decided to spend their last evening together. They enjoyed a sunset candle light dinner at the delightful outdoor Oasis on the Beach restaurant. They shared a dessert of pineapple, puff pastry and mango icecream.

Reluctant to say farewell, Andy and Jenna lingered to exchange telephone numbers and email addresses. Jenna noticed that all the other guests had drifted away. Their candle gave a final sleepy flicker... it was time for a parting embrace. Across the silvery sands, one last lingering lucky Chinese fire lantern hovered before floating gently out to sea. From the far moonlit corner of the beach, drifted

the unmistakable Bob Marley reggae hit tune which had first welcomed Jenna to Thailand..."Pack your Bags....." throbbed the refrain....

With a heavy heart, Andy clambered into a taxi and headed back to his hotel in Phuket town. With a lilt in her step, Jenna returned to the Boathouse lobby, mounted the stairs and slipped into her bedroom. Her spirit felt revived, her body refreshed and her soul de-toxed. She took one last look at the glorious full moon smiling down at her and then slid between the crisp white sheets.

Tomorrow was not the end of an exciting holiday. It was just the beginning of a brand new chapter in Jenna Ogden's life.....