

Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest

The Old Man on the Terrace by Steve Rosse

There has never been a stranger diner in the Boathouse Wine & Grill than Tristan Jones. It wasn't so much the child's wheelchair he occupied that made him strange, or the fact that his legs had been amputated at the hips. He had been only five feet tall before he lost his legs to diabetes, but it wasn't his elfin size that set him apart. He didn't bathe very often, or wash his clothes, but while these were the reasons the waiters seated him as close to the sea and its breezes as possible, these weren't the qualities that made him so different. What made Captain Tristan Jones unique among the other diners in The Boathouse Wine & Grill was the quality of his pride.

Some of the best food and wine on Phuket are served in The Boathouse Wine & Grill, and the regular clientele can recognize the best in food and wine and are willing to pay for it. Most diners at The Boathouse have been successful in their careers and are proud of their success. Most are well educated and are proud of their wisdom. Most are well dressed and well connected and well informed and have a lot to be proud of, but none of them carry their self-regard with such open arrogance as the tiny gnome in the tiny wheelchair who occupied the table at the down-wind end of the terrace every Wednesday for a few months in 1995.

Captain Jones' self absorption was such that he had written almost twenty books about himself, and those books were published and widely read by the international yachting community. He was a very famous fish in a certain very tiny, very expensive pond. The number of books it required to describe the events of his life is more remarkable when you consider that he spent most of that life alone, at sea, on tiny sailing boats. He claimed to hold several sailing records, and claimed to have been on three destroyers that were sunk by torpedoes in World War Two. He wrote a book about being frozen into the ice of the Arctic Ocean for 18 months, and another book about taking a boat under sail from the Dead Sea, lowest water on the planet, to Lake Titicaca, highest water on the planet.

After his death a Canadian writer would publish a biography of Tristan Jones that would expose with deadly, clinical, expert research that most of these claims were lies, while admitting the wonderful facility for language that Tristan possessed. But for the years he lived on Phuket Captain Jones was believed by most, yet still hated by virtually all, of the yachting community on the island.

Captain Jones got around, on those rare occasions when he left his home, on a three-wheeled motorcycle with his wheelchair folded into a sidecar, and people threw things at him on the road. People actually threw rocks and beer bottles at a tiny, crippled, poverty-stricken, old man. It wasn't the rumors about the lies in his books that made people hate him, it wasn't his almost daily letters to the editor of

the Bangkok Post which criticized, with a sharp insightful eye and a tongue completely devoid of tact, virtually every institution and person of distinction in the Kingdom. He wasn't hated because of his oft-stated opinion that anybody who did not devote his entire life to the sea did not have the right to call himself a sailor. A man who's invested a couple million dollars in a wooden boat wants to be able to call himself a sailor, and he doesn't want some shriveled up gnome in a goatee and a Greek fisherman's cap to tell him he's not. But a man who's invested a couple million dollars in a wooden boat doesn't care enough about what anybody thinks to bother throwing rocks.

Tristan was hated because of his conceit. He was hated because you could not be in Tristan's presence for more than a minute without realizing that to Tristan the rest of us were just characters in his dream of life. The world was a stage where Tristan was the star who did not like to share the spotlight with seven billion supporting players. His tiny chest was permanently puffed out, like a Robin's. He swaggered in a wheelchair. When he gave you his opinion his tone of voice let you know that you were an idiot for asking, even if you never asked.

For a decade he lived alone in a brick house in Rawai. He had a bed, a bookcase, a desk and a computer in his bedroom. There was no furniture anywhere else in the house. There was his bedroom, his filthy bathroom, his filthy kitchen, and two other empty, dusty, musty rooms. He had a single friend, another elderly man who visited him and did his shopping for him, and the woman who owned the island's single book store would invite Tristan to autograph parties once in a while. As many people would come to these to jeer the old man as would come to seek his autograph. Other than that, he had no family or friends. He was just as alone in his house on Phuket as he had ever been in any boat at sea.

We can only speculate on how Tristan felt in those empty rooms during the empty days of the last ten empty years of his life. But we know that on one day in 1995 an artist who was installing a show in the art gallery which occupied the front of The Boathouse in those years asked if Tristan would be the guest of honor at his opening. The hotel called and asked the old man and to everybody's surprise, maybe even to his own, Tristan accepted.

He arrived on the big night and rolled into a room full of people who were wearing casual beach clothing that cost as much as tuxedos in America. His own safari suit, the pant legs carefully folded under him, was clean. His face had been scrubbed so that you could see the bright blue stars tattooed on his earlobes. He rolled up to the microphone and he delivered a very intelligent, very witty, fifteen-minute talk on the difference between the visual arts and literature. He accepted applause that was more than polite, that was in fact admiring, and as he touched the brim of his cap with a finger and doled out a nod of his head to the crowd the look on his face said that he knew such applause was his due. He was received for dinner at the general manager's table.

At that dinner he struck up a sort of weird friendship with the man who was the public relations manager of The Boathouse, a man who wanted to be a writer himself, and before he left Captain Jones agreed to come back for lunch on Wednesday of the following week.

He came back every Wednesday for a few months, and then he died.

During the first few of those Wednesday lunches Tristan tried to be pleasant, an exercise almost painful to watch. As he grew more comfortable in The Boathouse Wine & Grill he tried less and less to be polite and he would have alienated the entire service staff except that his joy at being there was so apparent, his enjoyment of the food and drink so obvious, and his need for human contact so poignant, that nobody could bring themselves to dislike him for his meanness.

Tristan would sit for hours on the terrace, as the sun moved the shadows of the pergola slowly across the table, and the almost imperceptible waves would lap soundlessly at the bright white sand, and he would pile up the plates and line up the empty glasses and fill the ash trays and talk in his thick Welsh accent and with remarkable profanity about everything and anything. When he was at table you could forget about the wheelchair and the truncated body and he would lean on his elbows and point at you with his cigarette and tell you what was what and he would be, for moments at a time, the vibrant, voluble, unbelievably strong and utterly profane man who didn't need feet to kick the world in the arse.

He tried manfully to speak in Thai to the wait staff, and after having been resident in the Kingdom for a decade he could not manage the simplest sentences. Still, most people in the Food and Beverage Department looked forward to Wednesdays. The caustic old man was unusual, and for all his obscene language he had an odd, old-world gallantry around women and never put his hands anywhere they shouldn't have been, and so the young Asian waiters and waitresses revered him for his age and gave him the benefit of the doubt in the area of wisdom. The public relations manager looked forward to Wednesdays most of all. He had respect for a man who could hold up both ends of a conversation.

Captain Jones died alone in his empty house in Rawai, and he must have known for years that's how it would be. His obituaries ran in more than 100 newspapers around the world. He was cremated and his ashes carried out to sea and scattered on the water by his one friend, followed by a bottle of spirits. His house was sold, his furniture and modified motorcycle were sold, his wheelchair probably went into the trash.

The following Wednesday somebody else ate lunch at Tristan's usual table on the terrace, and every Wednesday since, people who enjoyed their food and wine and the view and the conversation without knowing the significance of that spot. Captain Jones had only one real friend at the end of his days, no other visitors, and

probably about ten thousand fans who had read all of his books and had a mental picture of the author that was nothing close to the old man who ended his hours on Phuket. He came and went from Kata Beach like a monsoon storm, dark and brief and tempestuous.

Tristan had nothing but contempt for any kind of sailor except his kind of sailor, and so was not welcomed at the island's annual Regatta, but for the last few months of his life, for just one day each week, The Boathouse was his fresh breeze in a stagnant Sargasso Sea. Perhaps having a place to come where he was welcomed, and tolerated, and indulged, made his last months easier for the old man. Maybe having a place where he could be the center of attention, where he could eat and drink like a king and never see the bill, added some pleasant hours to what was otherwise a long, difficult life. Maybe his Boathouse lunches gave him something on which to base his remarkable pride, after the books had been remaindered, the boats sold or sunk, the old mates and old enemies dead or enfeebled, the old victories forgotten by the world. With no windmills left in front of his lance, maybe he found some contentment describing his old battles to an eager audience in a warm, beautiful oasis by his beloved sea.

We'll never know for sure if those Wednesday luncheons had any effect on the old man's life, but we can be certain that for a few months he was a part of the life of The Boathouse and the lives of the people who work there. At the end Captain Tristan Jones may not have been happy, he may not have been loved, but in at least one place in this world he was surely missed.