

Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest
Shortlisted Entry
The Stranger by Tony Kelsey-Stead, Thailand

It was unusually heavy for a Phuket day. The morning rain had given way to a bursting sun which now cast sharp shadows all around the house and garden, giving warmth to an atmosphere that was thick and viscous. The stranger sat, with one leg raised, on the balustrade on the left side of the porch and was looking ahead and gently nodding.

“See. The thing with folks is that sometimes we find ourselves places we don’t want to be. I’ve seen that. I’ve seen lots of that.”

Sam was definitely puzzled. The man had appeared in his doorway not more than twenty minutes earlier and asked for some water and now he was sharing his life’s lessons with Sam who, if truth were known, had better things to do. The man had looked harmless enough and had a respectability about him that suggested an elevated status of some degree. Sam guessed he was Thai but the accent was, well, homeless. His clothes were vaguely western but loose enough and did not have enough of a definite design to be identified.

“What worries me is that people want to be here, on Phuket, but then lose themselves to something else,” he continued.

“How do you mean” Sam asked finally, not really understanding where the conversation was going.

“An acquaintance of mine,” the man continued quickly. “A long time ago now, came to Phuket to enter a Regatta or something, I can’t quite remember what it was, but anyway, he never made it.”

“Where was he from?” asked Sam.

“Oh, from somewhere in the West I think. I’m not really sure. Nice man but what a waste.”

The stranger drank from the water bottle that Sam had given him. Sam realised that a trickle of sweat was running down his back making him feel more uncomfortable. He looked at the stranger and noticed that he was not perspiring at all. Sam examined him closely looking for dark stains on his clothes or shiny skin and saw none. He was seemingly unaffected by the heat.

“A waste. Why?” asked Sam.

“Oh usual thing you know. Came here, saw the girls, felt the sun, saw the freedom, the cheap beer and lost himself.”

There were a few seconds of silence whilst Sam took this in.

“He became an alcoholic or what?” he asked.

The stranger turned his head to look at Sam. Sam felt even more uncomfortable now. This was the first time that the stranger had looked him in the eyes. Sam looked away and pretended to remove something from his leg. He could still feel the man looking at him. He now wished he'd told him to go away and not given him the water.

“Not exactly,” the stranger said. “Does that make you feel uncomfortable?”

“Er, no.” Sam wriggled uneasily.

“Where are you from?” asked the stranger.

“England” said Sam flatly, wishing the stranger would go away.

“Why are you here?” the stranger asked.

“Oh I came out with friends a year ago and never went home”, Sam said as confidently as he could.

“Oh I see,” the stranger said looking ahead again as if Sam wasn't really an important part of this conversation.

“And why did you come here?” he continued.

“Oh we came to do ...” the words stuck in his mouth like they were made of large floppy letters. “We came to do the King's Cup Regatta but we never quite made it.”

Just then Sam's girlfriend Naa turned into the drive on Sam's Honda Dream. She smiled at Sam, waved and drove into the covered area just to the right of the house. She parked the bike, walked back down the drive and closed the large iron gate then took off her helmet. She shook her hair free and walked up the drive to Sam who by now was sitting in one of the comfortable chairs around the table on the porch. She bent down and kissed him on the lips.

“Mmmm, you sexy man,” she said. “What you doing eh? I think you work but you sit here do nothing!” With that she disappeared into the house. Sam looked embarrassed at the stranger who was still looking ahead and behaving as if nothing had happened.

“Sorry,” he said. “Didn't know she was coming home” he volunteered as something of an apology. The stranger didn't move. Sam noticed that he really didn't move much at all. There were no muscle movements, no instinctive movements of arm or leg. Sam looked at the portion of the man's neck that was exposed above his open shirt. He could not see a pulse beating just underneath the skin of the man where he expected it to be.

The stranger turned to him again.

“So why didn’t you do the Regatta?” he asked. The question was blunt, purposeful. Sam felt he was being interrogated. He felt the man’s eyes again pressing hard against his skin.

“Well, we er, came to Phuket and we enjoyed life too much and never got further than the ‘Hello’ bar,” he tried to say laughingly.

Without a beat, the stranger said “That’s where you met Naa.”

Sam froze. He looked at the stranger who had now turned back to looking ahead and was slowly drinking out of the water bottle. How did he know Naa? If he did know her why hadn’t she acknowledged him? Was there something between them that he’d come to talk about?

“Hang on,” he blurted. “You know Naa?”

The stranger said nothing. He looked ahead and sighed deeply. Even in his anger Sam was relieved that the man was actually breathing normally.

“No,” he said. “I know of Naa but we have never met.”

That did not explain the blanking that Naa showed when she arrived home. Sam was really sweating now. The day was far too hot for a conversation like this and, besides, he had things to do. Perhaps it was time to ask the stranger to leave. What did he mean about ‘I know of her’ though?

“Look, I’m really sorry but I have no idea what you want from me”. He looked at the stranger for a reaction and saw none.

“My friend,” the stranger continued without moving a muscle, “didn’t make the regatta because he met a girl called Ampai. He rented a house and they moved in together.” He paused. “He then spent all day with his friends drinking, playing pool, playing cards, and going to the beach. At night he would meet his ‘mates’ in the bar and drink until he couldn’t stand. He’d get on his bike and wobble all the way home and then make love to Ampai aggressively as if she were a bar girl and it was her duty.”

Sam realised that the stranger had just described an average day in Sam’s life. Apart from the making love of course. Sam loved Naa very much. Sam was more angry than guilty.

“So you’re condemning your friend for enjoying himself?” Sam snapped.

“NO!” came the quick response. Then at a lower volume, “I’m just telling you what happened to my friend. Look, I better go. I’m obviously making you feel uneasy here.” He rose off the balustrade and stretched a little. He breathed out a big breath, which reassured Sam a lot, and put his water bottle on the table. He looked at Sam for a second or two.

"I'm sorry. You must think me extremely rude to come here and talk to you like this but, for some reason, I like you."

"Have we met before?" asked Sam quickly.

The stranger smiled. "Sam. We have met but you didn't notice me."

"Look. I'm really sorry I don't remember you. Maybe I was talking to someone else at the time," Sam offered pathetically.

"Let me tell you about my friend, Sam," the stranger said in a soft voice.

Sam looked up at the stranger and realised that he was blocking out most of the sun and was a lot bigger than he had originally thought. His voice was soft though and his manner calm. Sam did not feel threatened.

"My friend spent all day either drinking, or thinking about a way of drinking. In the end he drank himself to death. Not because of any bodily malfunction but because he got on his motorbike when he was obviously unable to do so. He killed himself when he cut a corner and hit a cement truck."

They looked at each other for a second or two. Sam recognised most of the last week in that single statement. How many times had he drank himself to the point of no return and then driven home, without a helmet, thinking he was the best thing on two wheels?

"Wow that's bad luck," said Sam lightly.

The stranger leaned down a little and completely blocked out any light to Sam. Sam knew however, that the stranger could see him very clearly.

"No Sam," he said firmly. "That is stupidity and selfishness at their most glorious." He paused and held Sam's eyes. The next words were spoken very slowly so that Sam could understand them. "Don't waste your life Sam."

With that he turned and walked down the steps to the drive. He stopped and turned again to look at Sam. Sam's mouth was open and he found that could not take his eyes off the man.

"Where did your friend live?" asked Sam quietly.

The stranger smiled a little and nodded slowly.

"Here Sam. Here."

The stranger looked at Sam for a second or two and walked down the drive towards the gate. Sam looked at his hands, they were shaking. He looked back up at the man but he had gone. The gate was still shut and Sam had not heard it being opened. He would have heard it open, he was sure that he would. He leapt out of the chair and walked down the drive. He looked carefully around a large bush on

the left hand side of the drive behind which the spirit house stood but the stranger was nowhere to be seen. The spirit house was one of the grandiose varieties with its own concrete plinth and was three storeys high. It stood at least half a metre higher than Sam. Sam noticed that one of the candles was burning. He felt his skin tingle. He turned and walked quickly back to the house calling Naa as he went. She met him at the door.

“You know that man I was talking to? Well I think he just disappeared into our spirit house. How odd is that?”

Naa looked at him with a frown.

“What man Sam?” She asked.

Despite it being a hot day by Phuket standards, Sam felt very cold.