

First Prize in the Mom Tri's Boathouse Student Short Fiction Contest 2008

"IT'S NOT ABOUT HAMLET"

By Courtney Woods (Age 16)

When Jack Shepherd walked into the Boathouse, it was an unusually warm Thursday night in March and the salty breeze off the Andaman Sea swirled with distant memories. He took a stool at the Galley Bar, ordered a Heineken from the impossibly young-looking man wearing a black bow-tie, and shifted his weight on the stool just enough to look around without being obvious about it.

He and Anita had sat just over there, he thought to himself. That table out at the far edge of the dining room, almost on the beach. Could that really have been just two years ago? It felt like he had lived a lifetime or two since then, and he supposed he had.

He took a long pull from his Heineken and glanced again at the table he and Anita had once shared. Tonight the table was occupied by three men and a woman who didn't seem to be having nearly as much fun as he and Anita had had back then. He started to look away, but then he stopped. His eyes jerked back to the table.

It couldn't be, he told himself. It simply couldn't be. But, and now he had no doubt of it at all, it clearly was.

Jack turned back to the bar - not too quickly, that might draw Roland's attention. As he sipped automatically at his Heineken, he considered his options. He could pay now and leave, or wait until he had the chance to move to a table in some shadowy corner - No! He shook his head, smiling a little bitterly. There was no reason to run. No reason to hide. Phuket was a popular vacation destination. There was no mystery, no conspiracy. Jack sighed quietly and traced convoluting paths on the bar top, the water pooling at the base of the bottle following his finger as he made a Venice of tiny puddles and canals.

He remained there, staring blindly at the wall as he slowly drank his beer, mind drifting to other subjects but always, always aware of who was sitting just edging the beach. He was shaken from his reverie by the sound of Roland's voice - so like Anita's, Jack thought sourly - and the cacophony of chairs being pushed back simultaneously. He waited. A moment, two moments. He dared to peer over his shoulder at the door, seeing, with no little relief, the shock of hair leave through the restaurant doors, heading for the street. Even the bartender seemed to notice as he deflated, the tension visibly leaving him. Catching the bartender's curious eye, he gestured for the bill, swigging back the remains of the Heineken as he extracted his wallet from his back pocket. He'd go home now. A narrowly avoided encounter like that was enough excitement for him for the night. He would head back to the hotel, collapse on the bed and fall asleep watching old movies. He rubbed his face with a hand still slightly damp with sweat and condensation, and moved out onto the beach.

The night tasted heavy with salt, a breath of wind forming the otherwise calm water into little ripples. Jack walked the waterline, his feet sinking a little into the wet sand. The stars were invisible, obscured by the eternally bright lights of the town, but the moon shone balefully down on the yachts that swung aimlessly in the changing tide.

Jack walked.

He trudged along the beach, in no hurry at all. His hotel was at the other end of the beach and he had all night to get there. He had only gone to the Boathouse for a beer and bucket of sobering memories.

Ahead of him was a throng of teenagers - just kids, really - sitting around and on a fleet of tin and inflatable dinghies. Glass Coke bottles with something probably not Coke were being passed around. Thankfully, they ignored Jack as he passed. Not far now, he mused. Just another two, three hundred meters.

“Jack.”

Jack kept walking. Just his imagination trying to scare him.

“Come on now, Jack.”

He kept walking, with a sense of impending- something. Doom? He gave a dry chuckle at his newfound melodrama.

“Quit being an idiot and stop.”

He stopped. He turned. He looked.

“Hey,” Jack deadpanned. Roland’s smile was lopsided and had a hint of defeat at its corners.

“Hey.”

“On vacation?”

“I’m tracking down a friend. He’s lost his way.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. The breeze grew with his tension. Roland paused, lips parted. Then the smile faded and his brow, so ghostly pale, furrowed. The picture of seriousness. Jack felt like laughing at the familiar expression.

“Why are you here, Jack?”

Jack shrugged.

“Phuket’s a nice place. I’ve been here before. It’s a good place for a vacation.”

“People going on vacation don’t leave without telling anyone.”

“Did my mother send you to find me? Because I sent her an email.”

“...”

“Even told her which beach on Phuket I was at. But not the hotel. I don’t need to tell her everything.”

“I’m not here because of your mother.”

“Is it Hamlet? Is he dead? You know you could have just sent me an email.”

Irritation on Roland’s face now.

“I’ve been following you since Madrid - why would I follow you halfway around the world because of - Jack, I’m not here about your *bloody dog*.”

The waves rolled in placidly, soaking their feet, now barely two metres apart. Jack was silent, side-on to Roland, facing the sea. Roland’s fists were clenched. A moment. They unclenched. The defeat returned to his face, but there was no smile.

“I’ve followed you since Madrid,” he said with quiet sorrow. “I bet you visited that gallery, right? Anita’s big break. We were all so proud. Her first big exhibition. She was so happy.”

“...”

His hair glinted gold as Roland tilted his head back.

“After that Paris. Then Copenhagen. In Berlin, I was going to talk to you, but that’s when I got behind. Arrived the day you left. Heh, we probably passed each other in airport. Thought you were going to stay longer, but I suppose it was too painful.”

He turned, now shoulder-to-shoulder with Jack, but facing the street. His face was lit up by a neon karaoke bar sign, alternately blue then red.

“And then here. Phuket.”

A sigh.

“She loved this place,” Jack whispered. “The heat of the tropics...the life, so easy and yet not...the Boathouse...our last anniversary...”

“I figured that’d be where I’d find you,” Roland rejoined. “She told me about it, by phone. I could hear how happy she was. How happy you made her. And I was so

damn glad that you married her.” He tilted his head back and sideways, watching Jack’s shadowed face. “She wouldn’t want this.”

“...”

“It’s such a cliché, but - you’ve got to move on. Two years since- since what happened, and you’re still not back on your feet.”

“|-”

“No, don’t,” Roland firmly interrupted. “If after 18 months of everyone thinking you’re surviving- grieving, yes, but surviving- you then up and run to every city that you two ever had a good time in...that is not moving on.”

Jack’s cheeks were wet.

“Why did you come after me?” he choked out, hands in fists and stuffed in his pockets.

“Because I didn’t really think you were surviving, and I owed it to you and my sister to help you. You were my best mate - still are as far as I’m concerned.” Roland grabbed Jack’s shoulder. “You need to pull yourself together and get on with life. You’re at the end of memory lane, and I reckon another trip’s likely to kill you.”

“I can’t go back.”

“I’m not asking you to. You can go wherever you want. Just don’t go there because it was where Anita had some gallery opening, or because she always planned to go there.”

Jack looked at Roland, half his face lit, the other half in shadow. Roland didn’t look angry. He didn’t look like he was about to cry. Instead, everything about him was a hand, reaching out to him. Offering to pull him free. He looked back to the sea. The yachts floated and bobbed, their mast lights stars lying low in the sky. The sea sighed. The town behind him pounded to the beats of a thousand songs. He raised his hands and scrubbed at his cheeks like a child who had scraped his knee. Roland’s hand slipped off his shoulder. The teenagers down the beach danced.

“So then...” Roland mused, his tone now light as a feather. “What’re you going to do, Jack?”

Jack was silent. A drying smile.

“I’m going back to my hotel and watching old movies,” he announced to the yachts in the bay. “Or maybe I’ll head out for a drink.” A sideways glance, a sidelong smirk. “Care to join me?”