

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

"DINNER RESERVATIONS AND REVELATIONS"

By Amy Van de Castele (Age 18)

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.

Anita.

Almost as if he had conjured her into the present moment using the eddy of memories the ocean breeze had brought him, there she was, sitting at the table larger than life – but with two crucial differences. This time he was not at the table with her – and the rigid, drab figure she cut was a far cry from the warm vibrant Anita he loved and remembered.

Reeling from the shock of this epic revelation, Jack took a long fortifying draught from his Heineken and risked another furtive look at Anita over the rim of the bottle. There was no longer any doubt about it, it was her - but he couldn't blame himself for not recognizing her sooner. She had changed her appearance dramatically – her hair, once luxuriantly thick and dark, was shorter and lighter now, styled in a jagged edgy bob and peppered with honey blonde hi-lights. The loose elegant clothes she had worn before - during her 'bohemian artist' phase - had been replaced by a crisp black suit, and the pensive, ethereal look that he remembered with tenderness was gone entirely. In its place was a severe expression that wavered between frowning solemnity and brusque condescension. It didn't suit her, and Jack mused grimly on what changes could have occurred in her life since they had parted ways to make her so hard, crisp and cold.

Just then his highly attuned senses – honed over several years of being embroiled in numerous deadly situations – alerted him to the fact that he was being watched as intently as he was watching. His cool blue gaze shifted hastily to the three men sitting with Anita, whom he had forgotten in his shock. Two of the men, both of whom looked worryingly familiar to Jack, were absorbed in their conversation with

his former wife, but the third, an unusually tall broad-shouldered young Thai dressed entirely in black, was looking back at him with the dark suspicious eyes of a cobra. Hurriedly Jack tore his gaze away from the little gathering and turned his back on them, hoping he hadn't been recognized. He didn't want Anita to know he was here, let alone that he had been spying on her and her new associates. Letting out his breath in a long low whistle of disbelief, Jack drained the rest of his beer, signaled to the youthful bartender to bring him another, and reached into his trouser pocket for the case of Montecristo's he always kept there. Cutting and then lighting one with an ornate silver lighter he had bought back home in Washington, Jack exhaled and watched the spiral of acrid smoke swirl away on the balmy tropical breeze. A few drags on a cigar usually helped him collect his thoughts and calm his racing mind, but this time it wasn't working, so he was relieved when the bartender handed him his second beer.

"I just can't believe Anita's here," he muttered to himself incredulously as he took another gulp of the bitter foamy liquid. "Why the hell didn't she tell me she was coming to Phuket? Why didn't she give me a call? And who the hell are those men she's with?"

The first two questions had no answers forthcoming, but the third one Jack was sure he could solve himself. Shifting his weight on the bar stool again, he used this subtle movement as a way to inconspicuously alter his position so he could get a better view of the four at the table by the beach. Taking care to keep his perusal as fleeting but thorough as possible, Jack studied the two older Thai men through a protective haze of smoke. He had thought they looked familiar, and sure enough a few moments' examination proved him right. The short portly man seated to Anita's left was none other than Sombat Veerasart, a prominent figure in the world of real estate, renowned for his shady deals which were so cunningly executed no officials had been able to prosecute him yet.

The other man had shrewd hooded eyes and was sharply dressed in one of the most finely tailored suits Jack had seen this side of Bangkok. He was named Colonel Alankarn, and he was also well known for his cunning feats of corruption - but his were indisputably the more impressive because of his status as Phuket's most highly decorated Chief of Police. As for the tall young man with the eyes of a snake, Jack didn't recognize him, but he figured him to be an associate of the Colonel or Khun Sombat. Either way, what in the name of all that is holy was Anita doing having a cozy dinner at the Boathouse with any of them?

Jack had seen some pretty outrageous alliances in his time, but this one took the biscuit for its sheer improbability, and the ugly hints it afforded at the business dealings of a woman he had loved and trusted more than anyone else in his long difficult life. It boggled his mind, and Jack was so disgusted he was tempted to march right over there, all guns blazing, and confront Anita and her illicit dining companions. Years of training as a lawyer and impromptu detective warned him away from that foolhardy course of action however, and Jack knew all he could do now was finish his beer and go home with an empty stomach and his mind overflowing with grim speculation.

He would have liked to sit down and have dinner of course, but some sixth sense told him that Anita mustn't know he had seen her there. She was obviously up to something shady, as much as Jack wanted to convince himself that wasn't true, and the only way he would be able to find out what it was would be to employ all his skills of furtive cunning and surreptitious investigation.

Shaking his head disbelievingly at the way his quiet evening at the Boathouse had, yet again, morphed into a maelstrom of criminality, Jack drained his second beer, handed the bartender a crisp five hundred baht note and rose to his feet. "Keep the change," he instructed. "Oh – and please send that woman at table twenty a Campari, on me. But don't tell her who it's from, got that?" "Yes sir," the bartender replied, his expression dead-pan.

Tucking his packet of cigarettes back into his pocket and turning reluctantly to go, Jack found himself hesitating, held in place by an old stubborn desire to rush to Anita's side. Through lowered eyelashes he cast a last long glance at Anita and her three Thai companions, where they sat silhouetted against the crimson ball of the setting sun. Then he turned regretfully on his heel and sauntered from the restaurant.

Walking to his car, his hands shoved into his trouser pockets, he vowed to himself that if an unpleasant revelation was going to occur every time he went to the Boathouse he would have to find somewhere else to eat sumptuous local seafood while watching the sun sink below the glittering Andaman Sea. Christ, it would be a nice change just to have a quiet uneventful dinner for once...