

Third Prize (2) in Mom Tri's Boathouse Student Short Fiction Contest 2008

"HELLO AGAIN"

By Joy C. (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.

He shifted on his stool once more, leaning more to the left to get a better look. Jack shook his head, rubbing his temples with his forefinger. This was not good, or maybe it was, and he just didn't know it yet.

Jack decided to be as subtle as possible, lightly touching the floor with his foot from the stool and delicately sliding a fifty baht bill on the counter, muttering for the waiter to keep the change. He walked towards the table where Anita sat and scratched his temple with the hand he was holding his bottle with. He remained someone who passed by her table this way. Jack just need to get his head straight before doing anything else, and talking to her right away wasn't going to do that.

When he knew he was out of sight, he kicked off his sandals and stored them under a beach chair. He couldn't be bothered to carry them as he took a stride on the beach. He trudged down the sandy beach, letting the cold sand squish between his toes. He stopped to look down at his feet for a second; he had just realized he hadn't been to the beach since Anita left him. Or rather, he left her.

Sighing loudly, he lifted the cold beer bottle to his head, pressing it hard against his forehead. Taking in a deep breath of fresh air, Jack's fuzzy thoughts cleared up. His conscience kicked in, letting him know what to do.

Anita's back, deal with it. Yes, he knew he had to 'deal with it', but was there even a good reason to? Two years ago, they had taken separate paths, gone their own way. He had made his peace with that. Well, eventually he did. But now that he knew the message she had left on his receiver three days ago wasn't just a dream, he wondered if perhaps the different paths they took led them to the same road. He could replay the message in his head, every word of it memorized:

“Jack? It’s me, Anita. I should probably say hi first... Hi. It’s been a long time since we’ve last seen each other. Two years, actually. You must know that... I hope you know that. Maybe I shouldn’t have called.... Look, I just felt strange about being back in Phuket and not telling you; it didn’t seem right. I’m just here for a two weeks, just passing through. I was wondering, if perhaps you’re free, we could meet up some time? Just call me back, I’m staying at the Lang Ri Hotel, you must know it. But if you’re busy or anything, you don’t have to call back. Its okay, I’ll understand... Just...” She sighed, *“Please call back.”*

Jack had deleted the message after he heard it, not wanting to hear her voice again. He just wanted to forget it, just forget anything had ever happened with a woman named Anita. But that was difficult, especially with their history together.

Jack sighed, letting himself sit on the sand. He threw his Heineken over his shoulder, thinking that drinking in his state of mind probably wasn’t the best choice. He was flustered enough. He hated that they ended things so suddenly, the memory of their breakup fresh in Jack’s mind...

“What are we going to do now?” Jack asked, *fiddling with his wedding ring. Usually this calmed him down and reminded him that he was no failure in the marriage department. But he still felt anxious and scared. After all, losing a child will do that to you.*

He heard her sigh, and Jack looked up at his wife Anita sitting up on her hospital bed. Her eyes were rimmed with red and her nose made a sniffing noise. Jack could tell she was holding back tears. He wanted to get up from his scratchy chair and comfort her, perhaps hold her, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He couldn’t bring himself to do anything. He just felt... numb. Anita sniffed once again and let out a shaky breath before speaking, “I don’t know if I have the heart to try again.”

Jack felt like letting out a sigh of relief; relief for the fact that she shared his reaction over the miscarriage; that he had no strength to go through this again. But his heart was still filled with despair.

“I don’t think I have it in me either.” He responded, *resting his chin on his hand. He felt the rough stubbles of 24 hours of not shaving under his fingertips. It had been a long night, and there was nothing Jack wanted to do more than sleep. But he knew he could never sleep peacefully again.*

“Are we going to end up like those married couples with no children?” Anita asked, *a lump forming in her throat. A lump formed in his throat as well. He knew what he wanted to say, but he didn’t want to say it. She was waiting for an answer, though, and he had to choose to either be a good husband or an honest man.*

“I think... we might as well be.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he wanted them back again. Anita’s face broke as she gave up on holding back her tears. **No**, Jack thought. *This was not what he wanted. He did not want her to cry again, he did not want to hurt her, and he did not want to be a failure of a husband.*

*But he knew he was. Jack knew it was his fault that they had a miscarriage, especially with Jack being less fertile than the average man. **The average man**, he couldn't even live up to the standards of the average man. Anita did not deserve this. She didn't deserve someone who couldn't give her a baby.*

"Anita..." he started, and the tone of his voice and expression on his face got her attention. During the next hour, she cried and yelled louder than she should have in her state. But Jack left anyway. It was better for her like this. It was better for the both of them.

It wasn't fair, the way he had left her. So suddenly, she had no time to react. So suddenly, that *he* had no time to think. Jack was selfish for doing it, he knew. But at the time, he thought he was doing the right thing. Again, he was wrong.

But no more. Jack knew that he had to get up and face the past, face the mistakes he had made, starting with Anita. He gave the sand one last squeeze with his hands then stood up, walking back to the restaurant. Before walking back in, he took a peek at Anita's table. She was the only one left, sitting up from her chair and grabbing her purse. A solemn look hovered on her face. He knew it was the right time. He walked up to her, as she glanced once then back at him again, her eyes widening and a small smile forming on her face.

"Hey..." he said, a bit of warmth reaching his heart.