

Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest
Shortlisted Entry
After the Tsunami by Bob Nimmo, New Zealand

As the first slivers of sunlight winked through the walls, Noi would roll up her sleeping mat, splash her face with water, then race her little brother down to the edge of the tide. She loved the bitter flavours of ocean and beach. There she and Vichai would keep a careful eye on the horizon for the first sign of their father's boat.

Noi adored the sea. She would sit on an old coconut stump and stare out across the murmuring surge at the heaven's edge. Often she walked along the warm sand with her brother searching for curiously shaped shells which they could sell to the tourists who came from the west with their pink flesh, laughter, strange speech and handfuls of cash. Some nights she would sit on the rocks and watch the burning sky dip to the cold, purple water. Along the edge tinkled the sparklers of the tourist strip with its famous restaurant "The Boat House". Noi loved her special little patch of the world.

Sometimes her father would take her out before the sun rose to catch shrimps. He taught her to flick the pronged spear so the transparent creatures would fill the baskets in the shortest time.

Once she went with her father and his friends on their fishing boat. She watched their thick, leathery hands pull the ropes and empty the nets. Bundles of slimy, slithering silver pelted the deck and turned it into a greasy mess of oil, brine and blood. She hated to see fish killed but her father told her they only caught what they needed. He said it was good never to be selfish; greed upset Buddha who rewarded those who worked hard and were respectful.

They lived in a little house on dunes above the beach, where they slept on mats and ate their food around a low table. In one corner an altar to Buddha glowed against the wall. A high, thickly thatched roof kept out the heavy rains in the monsoon season and the solid walls were easily able to deflect the strong winds. Noi felt safe within. Life was good.

Next year she would go to the high school in a far away town, away from her mother, father and grandmother. She would miss them all, especially Vichai. But that was before the Tsunami came.

One afternoon, when Noi was helping her mother sell their little souvenirs, she met Samantha. Noi was serving a big Australian when the slim figure appeared. She wore a Billabong t-shirt and tattered pink shorts, with thongs spreading her toes.

Her hair hung long and shiny, strands of white silk drifting in the wind. When she gazed at you, two pale blue sapphires captured the light.

Samantha held up a necklace of tiny shells. "How much?"

"One hundred twenty," Noi stuttered forgetting to hike the price as her mother had taught her.

"Fifty," Samantha flashed back.

"Eighty, my final price" Noi answered. Her mother looked across and scowled.

"Fifty. That's all I have," Samantha lied.

"Cannot, I lose money," Noi wailed.

"Sixty," Samantha countered with a narrow grin.

Noi dropped the necklace into a bag and took the money.

"See you round." Samantha swung away.

The next day when Noi was walking down the tourist strip carrying her tray laden with treasures, Samantha appeared again. This time the pale blonde stretched out on a deck mat toasting in the mid-morning sun. She called out and Noi knelt to let her examine the shells.

Samantha obviously knew little because she oohed and aahhed over all of them, finally selecting two large, spiky cones. This time she was content to hand over far too much money.

Noi sank to the sand beside her new friend and they talked about boy-friends, pesky little brothers and over-protective parents. Samantha and her family had come for the annual Regatta and were staying on the edge of the tourist strip. She insisted Noi call her Sam and invited her new friend to swim in the hotel pool. Each morning she would wait for Noi and they would walk together to the pool and swim for an hour, before the other guests rose. Twice Noi brought Vichai along and he raced about the pool with Perry, Samantha's little brother. Once she took Samantha and her family out on a friend's long-boat and they visited a beautiful offshore island where they swam all day, pausing only to eat freshly caught fish and drink coconut milk for lunch.

But this was all before the Tsunami.

Everything happened so quickly. Vichai was playing in the waves, when without warning the waves were sucked from the land. Suddenly fish were left flapping on

the shiny wetness. Noi knew something was wrong. She watched as dozens of children raced out to catch the beached fish.

"Vichai, come back here!"

Noi ran to him and scooped his little body into her arms. Ignoring his cries she pounded up the beach. Then they both heard a roar and the ground began to shiver. Vichai, screamed, "Noi, the sea, it.....it is big."

Noi increased her pace, lungs screaming for air and legs beginning to cramp as she uttered a prayer to Buddha. Then she saw it. Far off to her right a huge wall of water crested in dirty ruffles curled towards the beach, the shops, the palms, the tourists, the houses.

Noi had never seen or heard anything like this. The roar grew into steady thunder and she knew she wouldn't make it. The screams and yelps of children and dogs echoed off buildings directly ahead as the monster tossed them heavenwards. She saw a fishing boat splinter against a huge neon sign which sparked and swayed then was gone. People ran and yelled in hopeless terror as one by one they were sucked into the foaming torrent.

Noi's feet were still pounding the sand when she was lifted high and hurled forward. She clung tightly to Vichai, willing her arms to resist the branches which tried to tear him from her grasp. They crashed onto a flimsy roof. A grey darkness enveloped her, as she fought to get free of the obstacles pulling at her legs. Onwards they tore, borne on a current they were powerless to counter.

Suddenly she felt free air. "Breathe!" she screamed at the little head bobbing on her shoulder. Then they were swallowed again and carried on further. The sun hit her face and she was swirling around in a pool of filthy, debris-clogged water, a strange oasis. All around bodies heaved and tossed in the swirl.

But she had barely surfaced when the tide reversed. "No!" she yelped, looking vainly for something to hold onto but nothing blocked her path. She swept over roofs and banged against a submerged bus. Something gripped her legs. Then they were out of the water, held firmly by the fronds of a palm tree. She clung to Vichai. Bikes, signs and logs swept passed them.

But as quickly as it came, the tide was gone and Noi was trapped up the tree. She dropped to the ground, her fall cushioned by the bodies of two young lovers caught in a fatal embrace.

As the sea prepared to return, she threw Vichai over her shoulder.

Ahead stood the Holiday Inn. Noi could see people leaning out of windows several storeys above, spurring her on. As the thunder returned, she reached the stairs and

made the first landing. The sea crashed into the building swamping the lower storey. Again Noi was hurled upwards. The huge chandelier raced toward her, then Vichai was swept from her hands. With a resounding thud she found herself deposited in a corridor. She stumbled back onto a stairwell, finally reaching the safety of the tenth floor.

"Where's Vichai?" she moaned. No one answered. A man wrapped a towel around her bleeding ankle and she sank into a troubled sleep.

When she came to, she was in a hospital on the other side of the island.

"Where's Vichai?" she asked the first nurse who passed. The young girl smiled gently and promised to ask but as the hours passed nothing happened. From her bed Noi could see the bustle of the city and beyond the calm sea sparkling out to the horizon. How she had loved that sea. She turned and faced the wall, sobbing into the pillow.

"Noi, Noi!" She could see a white face framed in shining white hair.

Then her eyes widened and she was looking at Samantha. "Sa....Sam?"

"Hi there!" her friend thrilled and squeezed Noi's hand. "I have a surprise. We found something I think you lost." Samantha moved aside and Vichai took her place, a large bandage around his head and a huge smile across his face.

"Vichai?"

Arms reached for her neck and hugged her tightly.

"My father found him sitting in the street coughing up water. He told us what happened and we decided to look for you."

Some time later, Noi learned that her father's boat had disappeared and her mother had drowned in the first wave. Her grandmother would not let her see her mother's body before it was cremated on the beach along with hundreds of others.

As the days passed and Noi's strength returned, she discovered her village had been destroyed by the wave. All her neighbours and most of her school friends were dead or missing. It was the worst disaster the region had ever suffered.

She and her brother were given a small urn which contained their mother's ashes. These they buried in a private place and each afternoon at sunset they would place a small offering nearby and burn joss sticks.

On the thirteenth day after the wave, Noi and Vichai limped down to the beach. All the beauty had vanished. Palm trees bent broken and where Noi's coconut stump

had stood was a shallow pool of water. The stalls were gone along with all those who manned them and thin lines of smoke trailing skywards told their sombre story. Vichai and Noi moved in with their grandmother whose house, high on a hill behind the town, was left untouched.

At night they would sit on the balcony and stare out across the scarred beach to the sleeping monster which had changed their lives forever. How could the sea which gave them so much, take so much away? In two weeks Noi had grown from a girl into a woman and in that time her world had changed from one of safety and plenty to a dangerous place of hidden terrors and unpredictability. She would no longer be going to high school in a far away town; now she had to take care of her grandmother and little brother.

Noi sat on the sand staring out at the treacherous turquoise blanket. Samantha suddenly slipped down beside her to say one final goodbye. They sat for long minutes conscious the beginning of their friendship had come on the edge of great loss. Samantha and her family had to go back to their homeland but she promised they would return the following year. Noi hoped to see her friend again but she doubted the family and many families like them would ever come back.;

"Sometimes people return for better reasons," Samantha whispered as if guessing her friend's thoughts.

Noi tried to smile but it was too difficult, yet for a moment she felt hope. She dared to believe that Samantha would return and with her perhaps something seemingly lost forever might come back as well.