

## The Road Not Taken

Synopsis: An aging roadie looks back with regret at a lost opportunity to be with the woman he secretly loves.

Sometimes you find yourself in the middle of nowhere, and sometimes in the middle of nowhere, you find yourself. Jake pulled the crinkled map from his pocket. The dark ink was smudged in places from the sweat on his hands. In the harsh light of day the twisted lines he'd scribbled in the bar the night before, bore little resemblance to the streetscape surrounding him now. It wasn't as if he'd been drunk at the time, Jake had been sober almost four years now. Instead, he put it down to the instructions recanted in broken English which he'd only been half able to hear over the thrum of house music in the crowded club. The band had been playing the last three nights in Thailand and after their final performance, some of the crew had headed into town to unwind. Tomorrow they'd begin the task of packing everything up. Staging, sound equipment, even pyrotechnics, ready to move on to Bali where they'd put the whole travelling circus back together again.

Their last concert in this town had been a sellout and Tori had the crowd hanging on her every note. It felt almost like old times. Jake watched from backstage beneath one of the huge lighting gantries and recalled the first time he'd heard her sing. She had the voice of an angel, and a body to match. Whether she was singing to an empty audition hall or a stadium of twenty thousand, Tori could somehow make you feel like she was singing just for you. Once, Jake remembered, she had sung, just for him. He pushed the thought quickly from his mind. The past was no place to live, and sweet memories offered no solace for the bitter reality of the present.

After the show, the crew had hit the local bars to celebrate their last night in town. As the night wore on, the drinks flowed, and the music in the club grew progressively louder. Too loud for Jake's rock-worn ears. Word travelled around the bar they were with the foreign band on tour, and one or two of the crew started getting the attention of the local girls - groupies who probably thought they could score some favors from the crew. Jake decided to leave the younger guys to it. He offered up the excuse that he needed to be up early for a workout. It wasn't entirely untrue. Over the last couple of tours he'd noticed how the pack-out seemed to be taking just a little longer each time, clearing out any trace that the band had been there, but leaving behind aches and pains that didn't exist before. He'd tried running to improve his health, mental and physical, and for a while that'd helped deal with the stresses of life on the road. But Jake was sick of running...one way or another, and lifting weights was a closer match to the demands of pack-out and set-up. That's when the guy behind the bar offered directions to a local gym. Jake strained to hear, nodded, smiled, and scribbled down at least half of what he thought he could understand, before returning to the hotel. Back at his room, he studied his once jet locks in the bathroom mirror, which now reflected a receding line of gray flecked with black, that only a few tours before had been black flecked with gray. Jake wondered how many more years on the road he had left in him. As he pondered this another memory of another hotel, another tour from years gone by, bubbled up from his subconscious.

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"You were amazing tonight," he said to the woman sitting on the couch beside him. "I'll drink to that," Tori replied, clinking their shot glasses together before downing them. "But I'm a singer Jake, it's just what I do."

“No, it’s more than that,” Jake replied. “There’s a thousand other singers in a million other bands out there, but what you’ve got is different. When you sing there’s an energy. A connection. It’s as if everyone listening is receiving something on a deep spiritual level.”

“I think you’ve might’ve received a little too much of something on a spiritual level yourself.” She waved the empty bourbon bottle between them. “Anyway, you’re just a roadie, not a musician what would you know?”

“I may be ‘just a roadie’, but that means I’ve heard a lot of bands too, and I know something special when I hear it.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean...”

She let the sentence trail off without finishing it and for a moment the two of them sat in silence.

“Maybe they are.” She said eventually.

“Maybe they’re what?”

“Receiving something. When I write my songs they come from my own experiences. I pour a little piece of my soul into every one of those lyrics. For me, it’s a healing process. Do you understand?”

Jake said nothing, just nodded, and let her carry on.

“So maybe, when I’m up on stage and singing, I’m not just healing myself, but others who need to hear my music.”

She turned her head and her eyes met with his.

At that moment Jake wanted more than anything to kiss her. Instead, he hesitated, searching for the right words to tell her how he really felt.

“Anyway, look at us,” Tori said, breaking the spell, “I thought we were here to party?” She pulled a small plastic bag of powder from her pocket. “Want to share some?”

“Sure, but give me a second, ok?” He got up and made his way to the hotel bathroom as Tori started arranging two lines across the small table by the couch.

Jake entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He ran the tap, splashing cold water on his face to try and sober up a little, then stood swaying slightly from the booze, in front of the mirror and cursed the face staring back at him. Why couldn’t he just tell her how he felt? Outside came the lilting sound of Tori’s voice, singing him his own private concert from the other room. He could hear the sensuous tones but couldn’t quite make out the words. Then everything fell silent.

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Jake studied the deep crevices etched into his face by a lifetime spent on the road. How long had it been since that night? Another darker memory stirred. He tried to push it back down to where he’d buried it, but he knew what came next.

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Outside Tori had gone quiet.

“Tor?” He called from the bathroom.

There was no reply.

“Tori?”

Jake grabbed the door handle and burst back into the hotel living room. He saw her legs first, splayed out beneath the corner of the table. He rushed across the room, rolled her prone body onto her back, and prayed he wasn’t too late to revive her. How long had he even been in the bathroom? Had he himself blacked out?

The paramedics managed to stabilize her in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, but after that night things changed. Tori grew distant. She avoided him for the rest of the tour, and he went back to just being another roadie. Something else was missing too. The band went on to finish the tour and while the performances were technically sound, somewhere a light had gone out and they never quite reached the heights of that year again. It was then that Jake decided to go sober.

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Jake stood in the middle of the small, crowded street, trying to decide which path to take. He was about to give up and return to the hotel, resigned to the fact that at least he'd gotten a walk, when somewhere over the noise of the morning street stalls and the whine of motor scooters, he caught the faint rhythmic sound of music interspersed with a woman's voice shouting out. He followed the sound, turning down another side street when he saw the sign above some steps leading to a second-floor studio. Cardio Castle.

He ascended the stairs. At the top, a young boy sat behind an old trestle desk with a simple metal cash tin.

"Is this the gym?" Jake pointed to the door behind which came the sounds of a class in progress.

The young man nodded. "Fifty baht."

"How much to use the weight machines?"

"No weight machines. Just cardio. Fifty baht."

Jake weighed up his options. He could just return to the hotel, he'd come all this way already, that itself counted as exercise, but he was here now, and for the equivalent of a buck and a half he might as well join in the class, even if they didn't have any weights.

Jake slipped through the door and into what looked like it was once an upstairs nightclub, except the dancers here were all focused not on each other, but a lone woman standing on a makeshift stage at the front of the room. And they were all women. Long ago, and in other circumstances, this might've been a dream. But as the sole male in an otherwise all-female cardio dance aerobics class, it was a nightmare. Jake felt hopelessly out of his depth. He skirted around the wall trying to take up a position at the back of the class as discreetly as possible. With this at least, he was partially successful. That was, until the instructor, a pocket dynamo in tights shouted, "Okay girls, let's all welcome our new guest!"

This was met with a flurry of turned heads and shouts of encouragement.

Jake smiled, then tried to focus on the small spot on the floor in front of him. He felt ungainly, covered in tattoos, and towering over the lycra-clad bodies around him, but he was determined to do this. After a while, he began to find a rhythm and he started to feel less awkward. He focused on the steady beat of the bass and the chirping voice of Casey, the instructor. There was something infectious in her energy that the others in the class seemed to feed off. At first, Jake had almost scoffed at the thought that an aerobics session would've been as much of a workout as he would've gotten if this place had had a proper weights room, but it was getting harder now. His breathing was getting heavier, and his hair was sticking to his skin like he'd been caught in a tropical storm.

The class carried on. To Jake's surprise, it was starting to hurt now. The muscles in his legs began to burn and his lungs gasped for more oxygen to fuel them. But he pushed on because despite the pain he felt something else. There was something about this instructor. An infectious kind of energy bounced between her and the others in the class. Jake hadn't felt that kind of energy in a long time. There was nothing special in the words she used as she

urged the struggling participants on, but like the lyrics of a song, somehow she made her audience not just hear them but believe in them. And that's when Jake understood.

Finally, the session came to an end. The music fell silent, and the women began to disperse toward the female changing room. Jake slumped to his knees before grabbing a towel from the back of the room and wiping some of the sweat from his face and arms. At least one perk he assumed was he'd have an entire changing room to himself. But before he started to make his way to the door at the side of the dance floor, he looked up to find the young instructor had joined him at the back of the room.

"You did well," she said. "Have you done aerobics before?"

"First time," Jake managed recovering his breath. "Was it that obvious?"

"Well, maybe a little. I'm Casey by the way."

He rubbed his brow with the towel and extended a hand. "Jake," he said.

"Pleased to meet you, Jake. At the risk of being presumptuous, I was wondering if maybe you'd want to go for a drink?"

"Sorry, I don't drink anymore," Jake replied.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." Casey started to turn away, but Jake stopped her.

"No, that's okay... anyway, so how long have you been teaching aerobics?"

"About five years. I started doing it part-time for a bit of extra money, plus it kept me fit at the same time. But then after a while, I think I just kind of got hooked."

"We all have our addictions, might as well be one that's good for you."

"Yeah, but for me, it's not really about the exercise. It's about them. She pointed in the direction of the women slowly leaving from the changing room. It probably sounds stupid, but there's a special connection I get when I'm running a class. It heals them and it heals me too."

"No," Jake said, "that doesn't sound stupid at all. Someone else once said the same thing to me. What's stupid is until now, I didn't understand what they were really saying at the time, and back then I was too scared to let them know it."

"Lie's full of what ifs, huh?"

"I've spent most of my life on the road. I've made choices along the way, some bad, some not so bad, but if I've learned anything, it's most of us don't so much regret the things we've done, as the things we didn't."

"One always wonders about the road not taken, but you know, it's never too late to change the path you're on."

Jake pondered this for a moment. "You know," he said eventually, "That might be truer than you'll ever realize. Thank you."

"For what?"

"Casey, I appreciate you're flirting with me, and I'm sure you're a sweet woman, but there's someone I need to have a conversation with."

"Well, in that case, I guess she must be a lucky woman."

"No, I'm a lucky man, or at least I could be if she'll hear to what I have to say."

Jake got up to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"There's a road I should've travelled a long time ago. It might not take me where I thought it would, but I need to see where it goes."