

# Short Story 01 — An Ocean of Love

Quentin Ribac (Jirsad)\*

18 May 2019 — 19 June 2019

Once upon a time, on an island far away, there lived Love with the Ocean. The two women had their house by the beach. The Ocean herself admired Love, and since the island had emerged from the black depths of the water they had been together, and until it would sink again they would remain together. The Ocean would bathe in the water for hours and hours, her black eyes fierce and long hair flowing with pearls of foam, while Love laid on the burning sand with her smooth, golden skin. To the beach they had never seen anyone come. They fed from Sunlight, Moonlight and the light of each other.

“Will you stay with me?” the Ocean would ask Love every morning when the Sun waked them.

“I will,” Love would respond, “I will because there is not a better place than being here with you.”

And then the Ocean would go and bathe in the water, and Love lay on the sand. During the day they would not talk, the Ocean often glanced at Love, but their gazes never met. Love was staring at the sky, daydreaming about the shapes of the peaceful clouds floating by. “There is not a better place,” she thought.

One day, the Ocean caught sight of something on the water afar. It was a boat, a group of people had come to Love and the Ocean’s island. As the other side of the island was a cliff, they would have to land at the beach where the women’s house was built.

As they sailed closer, the Ocean frowned and raised her reefs, but Love, with gleaming eyes, asked the Ocean to let them through. And so they saw the people on the boat haul down the sails and start rowing. They began to hear them sing.

As they rowed closer, the Ocean squinted and saw the fishing nets the people had brought. She asked the Wind to go and blow against them, but before he could go, Love put her hand on the Wind’s shoulder and asked him to let them through. And so they saw the people on the boat row closer to the beach. They were still singing.

As they were about to land, the Ocean turned to Love and the two women looked in each other’s eyes. The Ocean was afraid and Love was curious, but Love was shy, and so the two of them walked into their house, took with them their woven mats, and walked away from the beach and into the nearby forest, before the people from the boat could have seen them. The singing voices were loud and sparkling now.

They landed and set foot on the island. Love, her slender body half hidden behind a banana tree, stood peering at the newcomers. The Ocean tugged at her elbow, but Love was not moving away and was staring at the people.

Women and men both were there, as well as small children gadding about on the sand and babies held by their parents who pointed all around for them to see. They finally gathered round in a circle. There must not have been more than a score of them. They bowed to salute

---

\*© 2019, all rights reserved

and then sat down. In the middle of the circle however, stood two men, tall and broad, who continued the song the others had interrupted, but their voices were deeper and louder even.

“Why do they sing?” Love asked, more to herself than to the Ocean.

“I don’t know,” the Ocean said. “Can we go now?”

And so they went away and into the forest, at a slow pace, as they cared for each step they took with their bare feet.

In the middle of the forest there was a hill, and they climbed it and watched. The two figures of the men still stood in the middle of the circle. The Sun was setting and they saw the people light a fire. They did not approach Love and the Ocean’s house.

The two women, stranded from their home, looked at each other.

“What if they don’t go away?” the Ocean asked.

“Why would they go away?” Love answered.

They spoke no more for the evening, and laid their mats down on the dirt and dead leaves and fell asleep.

The next morning, Love was awake first. She supposed the Ocean was tired from missing her bath. Love herself was missing the warmth of the sand, but she looked and saw that both of them were still gleaming, and they would thrive. But moments later, the Ocean woke with a start when voices were heard: it was the two tall, broad men, although they were not singing anymore.

Love knelt down and brushed a strand of hair out of the Ocean’s eyes and tucked it behind her ear. They both sighed. The two men were walking up the hill, so Love and the Ocean quickly rolled their mats and hid. The men emerged from the trees and reached the hilltop. They stood side by side to face the Sun and bowed down to salute him. Then they faced each other and spoke each other’s names: Louvain and Ockern. Afterwards they started to discuss something, but their words were strange. Neither Love nor the Ocean could understand them. However they realized that contrary to them, the men were not glowing.

From their hiding place Love looked at them but the Ocean did not. After long minutes, when the men had finally started to walk downhill and were far enough so they need not hide anymore, the Ocean waved her hand in dismissal, but the men were only hit by drops of dew. Love said nothing about it, but she was smiling at them. “Louvain and Ockern,” she whispered to herself.

When the men were finally out of sight, hidden by the trees, Love took a step forward. The Ocean, raising her eyebrows, made an attempt to catch her hand but only brushed against it softly. The Ocean looked at Love and sighed. Love tilted her head to the side, shrugged, and started to run downhill lightly.

She quickly reached the two men. They turned around and saw her and stopped walking. She was a few steps apart from them. They asked her something, but their words were still foreign. She extended her arms to them and they stepped closer and each took one of her hands. “Louvain?” she asked, and Louvain nodded. She asked for Ockern, and Ockern nodded as well. Then she brought the two men’s hands together, and after this moment they could only see each other.

They led the way into the forest and to the new people’s camp where their fire was lit. They were welcomed by women and men and children cheering and throwing sand at their feet. Ockern raised his and Louvain’s joined hands for all to see, and the people burst in happy laughter.

The people had started building small huts and shelters by the forest’s edge and respectfully kept away from Love and the Ocean’s house. Louvain and Ockern walked across the beach and bowed to each person and everyone bowed back to them very low. Love followed them

with each step, standing behind them. She did not bow, but she smiled to the people, and they smiled back. They all had long black hair as the Ocean's, and golden skin as Love's, but Love did not see any of them glow.

After they had met each of the women, men and children, Louvain and Ockern stood in the middle of the camp and softly gestured to Love to stand between them. When she did, both men started singing again. Their warm, deep voices started to toll in syllables Love did not understand, but the melody was slow and ever-changing.

For a long time they stood there singing, during which Love watched some of the villagers build shelters, some gather firewood, and others walk to the water with their fishing nets. She let out a sigh and was smiling and glowing, as the whole group finally gathered around the singers. Louvain and Ockern ended their song, and sat down. Love remained standing for a moment, listening to the rolling of the waves and the hushing of the leaves, then she sat down as well. Three villagers in the circle stood up and brought baskets woven of dried leaves to each of them. They were filled with cooked fish and bananas and berries from the island.

Love tasted the berries and cooked bananas, and looked at the fish for a moment. So Louvain said something to her and pointed at the fish. She took a bite of it, then another, and finally ate it completely and was satiated. Louvain and Ockern let their generous, ringing laughter out.

Love spent the rest of the day around the village with Louvain and Ockern, who walked to everyone in turn to assist them in their tasks. However when the evening came and the Sun started to descend to the horizon, she became weary and thought of the Ocean. She had not seen her since she had left for the beach. She decided to walk to the house she had shared with her for so long. But she could not step inside, as it was already dark, so she returned to the village.

The villagers had made a shelter for Louvain and Ockern under a roof of leaves and branches, and there the two men laid down and slept, and Love was watching over them.

The next morning she was not tired, and thought of laying down on the hot sand in front of her house. So she went there and did, but the Ocean was not there bathing and looking at her, and the clouds were not satisfying to watch. However, she would not leave to the forest. Love now lived between Louvain and Ockern.

During the days that followed, Louvain and Ockern would feed Love with fish the villagers easily caught. She would eat and smile at them, and slowly they began to share Love's glow. During the nights she would stand and watch over them. The Ocean however remained unseen and from time to time, Love would even turn her gaze toward the forest and hope for her to come back to their house, but she would not.

One evening, as Love had been standing watching the edge of the forest since Louvain and Ockern had woken, finally she saw her, walking at a steady pace in the direction of their house. The Ocean had come back. She stopped two steps across from Love and looked her in the eye, her jaw clenched and brow furrowed. She said nothing but when Love took a step towards her, she turned away and walked to the edge of the water. She started bathing.

Love heard her let out a sigh. Hopeful, she laid down on the hot sand, her golden skin to the Sun, and instead of watching the clouds, followed the trails of drops of water and pearls of foam on the Ocean. Only the Ocean would not look at her as she used to. After a while, and still without looking at her, the Ocean asked Love:

"Have you ever even set foot in the water?"

Love realized she had not, and did not know what to say. So the Ocean went on:

"But you ate the fish."

And then the Ocean stood up and, trailing her feet in the water, walked to the other end

of the beach. Love looked at her go for a moment, then had to turn and hide her face under her arms and away from the Sun.

At the sight of her shaking figure, Louvain and Ockern came to her, knelt down and, with their backs straight, touched Love's arms and neck. She twitched under their hands, and turned to face them. Her eyes were glinting with salty drops, which the Ocean did not come to steal. But Love stood up, and with her fingers, threw her tears in the water to join the others. She then turned to the tall men, and looked at the bronze of their skin and the bronze of the sky lit by the setting Sun. Louvain and Ockern nodded slowly, and all three walked away from the water and to the other villagers.

That night, Love stood as usual and watched over Louvain and Ockern, but she could not remain still: she often glanced at the end of the beach where the Ocean still was, and little by little she also felt as if she was pushed away. So instead of standing up she knelt down behind Louvain and Ockern's heads and listened to their breaths, mingled with the soft shushing of the waves nearby.

She looked up and suddenly, saw the figure of the Wind and felt that he was trying to blow her away from the men. The Wind had always been loyal to the Ocean, she must have sent him Love's way. In his face the thick eyebrows were ruffled, the forehead was wrinkled, the lips contorted. As Love guessed would happen, the Ocean appeared by the Wind's side.

Louvain and Ockern, disturbed in their sleep, twisted on their sides but did not wake up. But unconscious as they were, Louvain put his hand on Ockern's side and Love saw their faces appease. She however had to place her own hands on the men's large shoulders to keep steady. She looked up at the Ocean. Beside the Wind, the woman was standing with her head bowed but looking at Love in anger with a deep frown. The Ocean splayed her hand on the Wind's back. Raising his chest he started blowing stronger.

The Wind would not stop trying to blow Love away from the two men, but Love held on and, without really wishing to, clawed deep into Ockern's shoulder and woke him. Starting, he felt Louvain's touch nonetheless and for a second remained immobile as he watched his calm face. Then he turned his gaze to Love, to the Wind and the Ocean, and he took Love's hand. Slowly, he stood up, and started walking. He was pushing Love forward.

As they both walked against the Wind and towards the Ocean, Louvain was sheltered and resting. Ockern was a tall and broad man, but finally it was Love who was least afraid and marched forth, and it was Love who was pulling the man forward. They reached the Wind, but the Ocean had stepped away towards the water's edge. Ockern started to struggle against the Wind, but the Wind was strong and inescapable. Love looked at Ockern and the Wind, then at the Ocean, who was now stepping in the water.

Now Love wished she could put her hand on the heart of Ockern, but he was fighting and she could not reach him. She turned to the Ocean and walked to her, but the water retreated from her and she could not step in. The Ocean's eyes were black but gleaming with fury in the night, her shoulders were raised and her half-open lips were trembling. With her might she pushed the water inland, but did not let Love get a hold on a single drop of her. Ockern, still struggling against the Wind, quickly found that the Ocean had surrounded him. He stopped fighting, but it was too late for him to get away, and Love had been pushed away from him and could be of no help. The water closed on him, and the Ocean took Ockern away.

The water retreated. The Wind went away. There on the beach remained Love, and Louvain who was asleep. Her legs shaking, she walked to him and collapsed on her weak knees next to him. He woke up to the sound of her sob, and looked around him. The other villagers were asleep. Love had her face hidden behind her hands, and without standing up he came closer to her.

“Ockern?” he asked.

Love put her hands away from her face, her glow was fading. In her palms she took his head and raised it against her breast, and he felt her softness and heard her heart. He closed his eyes.

Suddenly she turned her head away towards the water. The Ocean must be bathing now. Love ran her thumb across Louvain’s innocent cheek, and keeping his eyes closed he whispered something softly but she could still not understand his words. She whispered:

“Ockern’s away.”

Louvain went back to sleep.

When came the morning, the Sun climbing his way above the horizon, Love and Louvain were awoken by a touch on their shoulders. It was a toddler, trying to shake them with his tiny, chubby hands. They sat on the sand. Love’s eyes were filled with sorrow. Through them she saw the child bow at Louvain and open his lips to speak to him in their tongue. His voice was fresh as a sparkling river. However, it broke near the end, and Louvain suddenly looked around himself.

“Ockern!” he exclaimed.

Then he went on speaking, louder and louder. He began to cry, and shout, and when he looked at Love in the eye, his lips parted, a face of pain, and asked her a question, she could still not understand. She felt her throat close, her chest tighten on her heart. She did not attempt to answer Louvain, but turned, behind the little boy, to the water’s edge. Then she saw, by the house where she had lived for so long, that the Ocean was there, bathing in the water. Love stood up.

At a slow pace, she walked towards her. Louvain and the boy followed her, just one step behind. Standing with her feet on the warm dry sand, just before it became wet, Love said,

“I... I cannot live with you anymore now. The villagers have come, I live among them. I watch over them. I...”

But the Ocean, water dripping from her hair onto her tense shoulders, did not let her finish: “You have always lived with me, and until the island sinks again you will.”

“No. They are gaining my light, they are becoming more like me,” Love said.

Then the Ocean answered, suddenly quiet, “No one can ever be like you.”

At this moment, a cry was heard. Louvain turned his head, and saw, a silhouette on the horizon, Ockern adrift. He seemed to be almost drowning. With a gasp, Louvain rushed and dived in. The young boy ran after him and tumbled face down in the water. Love tried to catch him up, but the Ocean caught him first and evaded her. Love could not step in the water. Anxious, she could only watch Louvain’s strong arms and thighs fight against the Ocean’s waves, his head coming in and out as he inhaled. She kept watching him.

After a long while, he reached Ockern, and swam back, dragging him, to the beach. Love and Louvain knelt beside him as he laid on his back, eyelids closed to the bright Sun. Louvain put his palm on Ockern’s chest and felt his heart beat. He could also hear him breathe.

Ockern said something, a short and tender phrase, and Louvain said the same. When he felt better, Ockern stood up, then the men, with Love between them, walked back to the village. Only the next morning did they find the child’s body, so small, swollen, lifeless.

It had been found by his own mother, who wept. Love went to the woman carrying her child in her arms and brushed his hair. She looked the mother in the eye and sighed. Remaining with her, sharing her grief, Love however did not take the memory of the boy away. She cupped it in her hands, warmed it with her breath, and gave it back for the mother to keep safe for as long as she could. When the night came, Love went as usual to watch over Louvain and Ockern. She let her eyes linger on them. They had their hands joined.

“My tears are with the Ocean,” she thought, “they are now far from me.”

She went down on her knees and leaned with her back to a tree. Was it her fault the Ocean had taken Ockern? And the child? Love had not been able to save anyone. Louvain had saved Ockern, the child had been forgotten. Love fell asleep, and did not watch over the men.

When she finally woke up, as the Sun was already high in the sky, it was to the sound of wistful singing. The villagers were mourning the child, Louvain and Ockern were standing tall in the middle of the beach, the child’s mother sitting before them. The men’s voices were low, but their skins were glistening under the Sun more than Love herself. One by one, the rest of the villagers came to the mother, gave her a kiss on the forehead, touched the memory of the child and took away a part of her grief.

Standing up Love watched this from a distance, and last in line came to the mother as well. She was allowed to do as the other villagers, and she realized she and them were now alike, except for Louvain and Ockern.

The villagers wished to offer the boy’s body back to the Ocean whence they came. So they carried him to the little house, in front of which, unbothered, the Ocean was bathing. Love was among the people, but it was Ockern who walked to the edge of the water and said something to the Ocean. She looked at him, a hand lightly brushing at her waist. She seemed to think for a moment then, her clenched jaw twitching, stood up, her eyes black as ever, took the child’s body that was offered to her, in her arms, put it down in the water, and let it drift away in silence. Never did she take a look at Love. But then she spoke to Ockern in a low voice, and Love could not distinguish the words.

During the rest of the day, Louvain and Ockern kept Love away from them, and without their help, she had to join the other villagers in their daily tasks.

She felt she was not more useful or needed than the rest of the villagers. But then in the evening, Louvain came to her, and told her, and she understood, “Love, you are common now.” And Love, wide-eyed as his words were clear to her, but dismayed as she was now dull, without a smile on her face, took from his hands the fish and bananas and berries he was offering her as meal, but she fed from this less than from his light.

That night, Love did not know where to go. Louvain and Ockern were shining with their own light now, Love sensed she had to remain with them, and yet she knew they would be the ones to watch over her now.

After everyone had gone to sleep, she was still there, on her own, on her knees in the middle of the beach. Moonlight shined on the tip of the waves, the Ocean was asleep as well. She felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning she saw the mother of the drowned boy.

“Will you go to your house tonight?” the mother asked, gesturing at the shed by the water.

Love turned to her old house, then looked up worriedly at the mother, and said nothing.

“Then come with me,” the woman said.

Slowly Love stood up, and together they went to the mother’s shelter where she lived with her husband. The man was not as tall and brown as Louvain and Ockern, but he had a kind smile and extended his hands. Love took them in hers, they bowed and then he stepped aside to his wife and put one arm round her waist, and she put her head on his shoulder.

“You live with all of us now,” they told Love. “Will you watch over us tonight?”

Love’s heart swelled and she answered simply,

“I will.”

And so the woman and the man went to sleep, and during the night, Love sat near them, sometimes closing her eyes to focus on the sound of their breaths. But then came the Wind. In the middle of the night, he was quiet. He opened his mouth to speak, but Love raised her hand and silenced him. He started pacing around and disturbing the sand, and the people sleeping.

So Love walked to him and pushed him away.

The next day the Wind came back, and he disturbed the sand, the trees and the villagers. Love tried to push him away, but she could not, as he was strong in the morning. So Love turned to Louvain and Ockern, and asked them for help. Louvain came to fight the Wind, but Ockern, who had previously been taken by the Ocean, took a step back.

Seeing this, Love went to Ockern and, shorter than him as she was, put a hand on his chest, and, this time, she started singing.

She did not know the villagers' songs, so she had to make her own words and melody, but her eyes were on Ockern, Ockern's eyes on her golden skin and moving lips, and Love felt that once more, they needed her. She was smiling, and glowing again.

Ockern looked up, at Louvain struggling against the Wind, and suddenly ran to him, took his hand, and together they made the Wind go back to the Ocean. The villagers cheered, and they celebrated Love. But later, Love saw that the Ocean was bathing in front of the little house, so she walked up to her, laid down her golden skin on the warm, dry sand, looked up at the clouds, and said,

"I can be with you now, for a little while, until the Wind returns to the village."

And the Ocean answered, and her eyes were not fierce anymore,

"It's alright, you may go with them now."

Love nodded silently, stood up and walked away. But the Ocean, pearls of salty water trailing down her hair, her shoulder, and her eyes, whispered, as Love was leaving her,

"You gave me a drop of your tears, but I am bathing in mine for you."

The End