

Ronnith Neumann
Encounter by the Sea

Translated by Ivan Parra Garcia

I imagine:

I am a very old woman. I am happy, since I write books for children and live on an island, I live by the sea.

In my house's rooms, you can hear the buzzing of the cicadas, you can hear the waves come and go and ebb in the sand. My house stands on the edge of a high cliff facing the sun. It is not big, it is spacious and bright. Oleander blossoms in the garden, bougainvillea climbs up the walls, an olive tree shades the wooden furniture group where I sit and work in the mornings, at night jasmine scents the air.

From the veranda, you overlook the wide bay and the sea, the mysterious colors of the water, carefully graded, streaks of torn fields, flowing apart, lichen in blue-green, the white crests of the waves glitter. The veranda is entwined in vines, the heavy, dark grapes grow into my mouth. The village is a little farther up the street. The ornate little church rings in the morning, at noon, and in the evening.

On Sundays they celebrate their festivals.

I imagine:

I walk down the steep stairs, lined with pine and cypress trees, to the bay below the house. I walk slowly, but I am healthy and strong, and my legs are still willing, I am old and happy.

Up from the bay, the laughter of the vacationers rings towards me, the scent of sunscreen rises into my nose.

I imagine:

I meet a young girl in the bay below my house. The young girl and I: we sit opposite each other. We sit at a table on the terrace of a fish restaurant. All tables are occupied. The restaurant is named after the bay. It is a very small restaurant, it does not have a large selection of dishes, but it does have a good cook. He prepares the dishes according to ancient recipes that no one else knows anymore. Many come here from far away. The cook is known on the island. The tourists benefit from that. I have known the cook for many years.

The young girl opposite me is happy, since she writes stories for children, and she is taking a long and cheerful island vacation by the sea. She lives in a rented room above the bay, diagonally down from my house. She lives alone, but likes to live alone. She describes the

room's interior. She describes it as simple, practical, and pretty. In the room next door lives a family with two children. The children are loud, but that does not bother her. She loves children. She speaks in an easy-going way, in short and clear sentences, without coyness. Her natural manner pleases me. I like to listen to her.

We both drink coffee. The people around us are noisy. A donkey screams in the distance. A dog yowls. Extended and hoarse.

I imagine:

The old woman treats the young girl to a piece of cake. The young girl is happy about it, she laughs, her laughter is clear and ringing. The old woman thinks: like the ringing of the bell up in the church tower. So bright and ringing. She enjoys her laugh. She likes the girl. She would like to hear her laugh even more.

They both drink a second cup of coffee. And eat the cake. A young couple play beach ball on the beach. Someone tries to start the motor of his inflatable boat.

I imagine:

The old woman invites the young girl up to her house. On the way, they stop by the girl's room. She fishes out a t-shirt and a pair of shorts from the dresser. The dresser is old and dusty just like the rest of the room. The room is dark but cool. The toilet is outside in the hallway. The plaster is peeling on the walls. The old woman does not like the room. She casually knows the landlady. The wall of the house is frail and rotten. There was an inspection once—years ago. But that is long forgotten. The landlady is taciturn and bitchy. No one can muster up the courage to speak to her. The girl has never seen her. She has rented the room through an agency.

She simply leaves the beach bag with the wet things on the floor. Hairpins are scattered all over.

I imagine:

The old woman and the girl sit on the veranda of the house. It is September, and the wine is ripe. The girl admires the grapes. A bunch of grapes lies heavily in her hand, full-blooded. She picked it herself. The girl's eyes shine. She exclaims: what a dream house,

and this view, one can only dream about it, raves: oh! one day I . . .

The old woman remembers her dreams. The memory has pretty much faded. Above the mountain, the afternoon cloud drifts towards the valley.

I imagine:

The young girl talks about the disco down on the beach, about the boys and how pushy they are, their crude jokes, she talks about her boyfriend, in the city where she studies, and she stuffs her mouth with the grapes in her hand. Her eyes shine, brown crusts form around the laughing corners of the mouth.

When asked, she talks about the stories she writes, for the children, just like that. She looks around and asks. The old woman listens and smiles. Long extinguished memories befall her. All of a sudden. And like an attacking animal.

I imagine:

The young girl stays for dinner. The old woman finds sliced chicken, salad, and a dry country wine in the fridge. The young girl says: the wine is good, but dusty. They both have to laugh at that. The wine is cold and refreshing. They let it gurgle down their throats. For dessert they have figs in yogurt and honey. The figs are still warm from the tree. Tree-warm, the old woman says. The girl has never eaten fresh figs. Only those for Christmas. The dried ones. From the plates. At the end, they drink a mocha. The spoon will stick straight up in that, the girl says. But the handle of the spoon tilts to the edge. At that they both have to laugh. They sweeten the mocha with a liqueur.

From afar, the strange call of an early night bird sounds.

I imagine:

The old woman and the young girl stroll through the village. The young girl stops at the church. She admires the old frescoes, the rain-weathered facade. The church bells ring in the evening. They stand under the plane trees. The ringing of the bells and the laughter of the girl blend into a bright cheerful tone.

Inside the candles glow. Warm, cozy, and calm.

Only the crackle of the wicks fills the silence.

I imagine:

The villagers gaze at the girl, they follow her with their eyes. A pretty girl, they say, ask: your daughter? Granddaughter? The old woman smiles, shakes her head. She understands the words, the sentences. But only a few. She figures out the context herself.

She is esteemed. Here. She needs the security. The villagers timidly love her. Some know her books. Others know her from stories. The rest of them pretend to know her. The language of the children is international. Her language knows no borders.

I imagine:

The young girl likes it in the village. She likes the laughter of the old men and women, the sound of tossed-out words she does not understand. She stands in the shade of the plane trees on the plaza in front of the church and laughs with the men and the women.

The men pat her on the shoulders, the women take her in their arms, caress her hair. Above it all the plane trees whisper. The old woman takes the girl's arm. She feels the moist velvety coolness of her skin, the fine sweat-beaded hairs. The girl has never been in the village before. She hadn't gone that far up the mountain at all. The fine blonde hairs on her arm glitter over her tan.

I imagine:

The old woman breathes in the scent of the girl's arm. It smells of the salt of the sea, of old memories, long forgotten. The young girl laughs her laugh, her face above the old woman sinks down, towards her. The old woman senses the lips, strong, full lips and very gentle, in her hair. She closes her eyes, by her inner eye passes the red of the lips, full-blooded, and alive. A hint of beautiful fantasies.

The girl's hand, the long cool fingers stroke her cheek. The old woman feels a tear. She has never been so happy. The young girl erupts in laughter. One of the men planted a kiss on her cheek.

I imagine:

The old woman gazes after the girl in the dusk as she descends the stairs to the bay, lined with pine and cypress trees. The girl walks securely and quickly with easy, lively steps. She carries a plastic bag

with figs and grapes in her hand. In the kitschy postcard view, the crescent moon adorns a nearby pine slope.

The old woman is a little afraid for the girl. She doesn't know why. She gazes after her. The memories have evaporated now. The girl waves, a small white hand disappears in the evening twilight.

It is getting dark. The darkness spreads. The southern night is quickly falling. From one minute to the next.

I imagine:

The old woman sits on the vine-entwined veranda of her house, the girl hunkers down in her dark rented room. Down in the bay the waves come and go, ebb in the sand. The nocturnal cicadas buzz their songs.

I imagine:

Both listen to the buzzing of the cicadas, the coming and going of the sea. To the ebbing. To time. Which drips away. Unrelenting. In the darkness of the room. Under the vine tendrils of the veranda.

I imagine:

The old woman in the house on the cliff, above the bay, that is me.

I imagine:

The young girl in the rented room above the bay yet beneath the old woman's house, that is me.

I imagine:

I am both. I am two.

I live in my own house. I live in a rented room.

I am a very old woman. I am a young girl. I am the middle of both. I am neither of them.

I imagine:

I have only encountered me. On the island. In the bay. Below, by the sea.