

Paying Back the Ocean

by Rachel Sawaya

Eventually we realised that something had to be done.

So we decided to take the ocean home with us.

At first most people stored her in old plastic soda bottles, while others used black rubbish bags, (checking carefully first for holes). They made excellent squishy chairs. Some people strung ropes with glass bottles and filled them with seawater. They hung them along the walls of their houses like green lanterns.

Children brought teacups along, dipped them at the shore, then walked them carefully back to the car. Mothers topped up teapots behind them.

Tankers were driven to the beach to chug ocean through a pipe, then drove her to empty swimming pools around the country, and poured her in, fish and all. People picked out the plastic bags and sealed them up, stuffed with ocean and left to roll slowly away.

A few people even asked the tankers to visit their houses, and soon sloshed around in ocean whenever they got out of bed.

They had to tread carefully to avoid seastars and urchins, but the seaweed tickled pleasantly.

Ocean was poured into the basements of all the buildings in the business district, so if someone pressed B in an elevator, they put on a scuba mask and snorkel first. Some had to wade out to their car and scold away a dolphin or two.

But, people didn't mind. It was the least they could do, after everything the sea had done for them.

People dipped their hands into the ocean, stroked it with fingers that wrinkled and swelled. Old grandmothers sang to her as she had once sung to them, while grandfathers tickled her with their black tipped canes. People swam with the sea in swimming pools and massaged bags of ocean while they watched TV.

Every weekend, for a year, everyone went down to the beach to help move the ocean. It retreated, until eventually it took nearly a day to even catch sight of the water.

Some people started talking about just leaving the ocean where she was, after all, she'd done alright for herself so far, and why should we have to make the effort?

But then they caught glimpses of people from other countries in the distance, all of them with their cars and their tankers and trucks, all of them gathering in the ocean, and giving her a home.

The job was finished soon after that, with the prime minister taking the last test tube of seawater and installing it in parliament, stoppered safely above the moray eels that now glided over the saturated carpets and between the distinguished chair legs.

Once the ocean was tidied away everyone breathed easier. Sometimes they would hear the soft echo of the ocean lapping the walls beneath their offices, but they all laughed because she's an old spitfire, that one, and vowed to take her some iodine tablets, next time they got a chance to have a visit.

By this time, new parking lots had been built on the tops of buildings, so no one had to hold their breath whenever they dropped their car keys.

Salt crust was building up, around the edges of wine bottles and saucepans, once brimming with ocean and now only half full. Sometimes people would bring out bags of saltwater, now covered in kete or bright knits, and give them a quick cuddle, before stowing them back in the cupboard.

People went for long walks over the ocean floor, now dry and coated with a dust that tasted like tears. They fingered the sharp, dead corals and scratched their initials into old shipwrecks. When it rained, if people squinted a little, it was almost as though they had the ocean back. But open eyes revealed it was only a scum of rainwater over the rock, and the sun and the wind soon tore it away.

Eventually the ocean was almost gone, through a thousand little holes. She was drawn into the insulation of houses, spilled on kitchen floors, dried up with teatowels or walked into a thousand grassy backyards. The last few inches, so dense with salt they almost crawled up the walls of their containers, were honored in ceremonies around the world. People cried into the ocean, begged her to come back, took her for walks around the bed she once lay on. Salt crystals were scraped from jars and teacups all over the country, and allowed to blow freely in the wind.

People watched the river mouths, convinced the ocean would come back. But all they found there was water, mud and footprints left by the curious and the nostalgic.