

Answers

## HOMESICK \*

THE MOON APPEARED, just waning now, three nights past its utmost fullness, at the summit of the mountain, and she, all in white, after many a sigh and many a melancholy song, cried out:

‘Oh! If I could just get in a boat... right now... that’s what I’d like... so we could go over there!’

And with her hand she was pointing beyond the harbour.

Mathios had not perhaps noted that in her speech she had shifted to the plural — at the close of her wish. But instinctively, without thinking about it, he replied:

‘I could push out that boat on the beach... How about it? Shall we give it a try?’

And he too used the plural at the end of his speech. Without moreover pausing to think, as though he wanted to see if his muscles were strong, he started to push the boat.

The lad was standing near the water’s edge, where, time after time, whispering softly as they arrived, the waves were swallowed by the sand — without their becoming tired ever of this their eternal monotonous diversion, without its becoming sated ever with this its everlasting salty irrigation. The young woman was on the balcony of the house, which her husband, an elderly fifty-three-year-old, had rented to receive her in; a house situated on the shore, now in and now out of the waves: in with the flood-tide brought by the south wind, or out with the ebb-tide induced by the north. The boat was resting on the land and rocking on the sea, its bow stuck in the sand, its stern swayed by the waves, a light skiff, graceful, with a pointed prow and space for four or five.

A large local schooner with its cargo had put in at the harbour

three days before and was waiting for a favourable wind before setting off on the final leg of its voyage; the captain for the third night now had reposed contentedly at home in the proximity of spouse and offspring; his shipmates, all of them locals, were making the round of the bars, compensating in three nights for the enforced abstinence of weeks and months; the ship's boy, not himself a local, was left sole guard of the ship with its tackle and its freight; and the sole guard of the ship's boy was the ship's dog. But that evening, the ship's boy, a lanky eighteen-year-old who had all the expectations of a sailor but not the wage, had lingered at a bar which was somewhat out of the way, being on the inner road of the coastal market, and had found his own consolation there, as a stranger among strangers. He had left the dinghy half dragged up on the beach, with its bow stuck in the sand and its stern swaying on the waves, with its two oars resting on the stern, two light oars which a youth would handle with indescribable joy, glorying, as he did so, in a strength multiplied by the fleeting softness of the waves, as yielding as a mother in her weakness for a pampered child, which carries her where it wills with its whimpers, with its wants; oars that, resembling a gull's two wings, which carry the downy white body of the bird to the surface of the sea, would guide the boat towards the sand and the outstretched arms of the land, as its wings guide the gull to its cave in the sea-washed rock.

Mathios placed his two hands on the bow, braced his two legs behind him, pushed with all his strength, and the small dinghy gave ground and fell with a splash into the sea. It nearly got away, acting under the powerful impetus; for he had neglected to hang on to the bowfast, the line attached to the bow. But at that, he threw off his flimsy sandals, he did not have time to roll up his trousers, he went up to his knees in the water, and he caught the boat by its bow. He dragged it toward a small and makeshift mole.

She meanwhile had vanished from the balcony, and a few minutes later she appeared, with her white smock shining in the light

of the moon, at the northern corner of the house, coming down toward the shore.

The youth saw her and felt both joy and fear. He was acting almost unconsciously. He had not dared to hope her capable of doing it.

She, not caring to disclose her innermost reflections, said:

'Yes... Why not? Yes. Let's go once round the harbour, now in the moonlight.'

And then, shortly after, came:

'So that I can see how I'll like it, when I take ship to go over there...'

She said 'over there' each time, and she meant home. Behind the first, green mountain, that above which the moon had risen, a mountain black at night, but ashen now and umbrous in the light of the moon, there rose the peak of a high, a white, a sometimes snow-covered and sometimes bare and rocky mountain. That was her home, the place where she was born. And she sighed after it as if separated from it by an entire ocean, when, in fact, there were but scarcely twelve miles between and in daylight the green mountain's low ridge did not suffice to conceal the tall summit of the white mountain. And she yearned after it as much as if she had been parted from it many years since, when but scarcely a few weeks had she been on the neighbouring island.<sup>1</sup>

At all events, she placed her hand, white and so light, innocently on the shoulder of the young man, who trembled at the touch from head to toe, and she stepped into the little boat.

He followed after her and, taking an oar, began clumsily to push off. But instead of pushing against the pier, he pushed on the left against the bottom, and in consequence the boat swung round, and it bumped slightly against one of the stones in the pier.

'Watch out! We'll damage their boat.'

This made her reflect more soberly on things, and afterwards came:

<sup>1</sup> The young woman is from the island of Euboea (Evia) which faces the island of Skiathos from which can be seen the mountain of her home village, Dirfis.

'Won't the boat be missed? Won't they want it? ... Whose can it be?'

Disconcerted, the youth replied:

'Seeing we're just going once round the harbour and coming back ... I shouldn't think it'll be missed that soon, whoever it belongs to.'

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He sat at the oars and started rowing. She was seated in the stern, and the moon's pale light was shining on her, seeming to dust the fine features of her handsome face with silver. The lad was gazing timidly at her.

He was not a sailor, but having been reared near the sea, he could row. He had come home half-way through the year, having left the school in the region's capital, at which he had been a pupil, after declining the punishment prescribed for him following an argument with a schoolmaster of his, one seeming to him to be possessed of a greater than his due degree of ignorance. He was just eighteen, but with the already dense first growth of his chestnut beard and moustache, he looked nineteen or twenty.

The young woman, once she had sat down, by way of afterword to her expression of anxiety of shortly before as to the possibility of the boat's being sought by its owner, facetiously voiced this thought of hers too:

'The boat's owner will be looking for his boat, and Uncle Monachakis will be looking for his Lialio.'

The young man grinned. Uncle Monachakis was the name of her husband. Lialio was her own name.<sup>1</sup>

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At that moment a dog could be heard barking loudly on the deck of a ship. It was the ship's dog on the same laden schooner to which

<sup>1</sup> Often women were known by the feminine version of their husband's name.