

extract from

ithaka

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ON THE SHORE

'Stop it!' Ikarios blinked and shook his head. 'You're kicking sand in my eyes.'

'I didn't mean to,' said his twin sister Klymene. 'I'm bored, that's all.'

She took hold of her long brown hair, twisted it and fixed it on the top of her head with a thin little stick that happened to be lying beside her on the sand. It was very early in the morning, with the sun still low in the sky, but the day was already hot. She waited for every wave that raced towards her to swirl cooling foam around her feet. We're on the beach, she thought, and he's making something out of sand. He's been doing the same thing since we were small children. She knew what he was building because he kept pointing out features of the structure.

'It's not an ordinary hill,' he said, piling yet another handful of damp sand on to the lump that he'd already made. 'It's a citadel. The citadel of Troy. Later on, we can line up some stones or something to show where the Greek lines were, across the plain.'

'I don't care what it is,' said Klymene. 'It's boring.

The war in Troy ended long ago and still you and Telemachus keep playing Greeks and Trojans. I wish everyone would shut up about it.'

'Telemachus' father was the hero of the war,' Ikarios said, his voice full of awe. 'It was his idea to build a horse and fill it full of soldiers.'

'I hate that story. They set fire to everything and the whole city burned down. Imagine how horrible that must have been.'

'But we won!' Ikarios looked at his sister in amazement. 'That's what matters.'

'But it's not all that matters,' Klymene said. 'People getting killed and burned alive matters too.'

Ikarios sighed, and Klymene knew what he was thinking: girls are weak and stupid and don't understand about important men's things. Boys' things. She knew he didn't feel like arguing about it because he said: 'Anyway, Odysseus was the one. The one who helped us win. He's the cleverest of all the Greek kings.'

'I know,' said Klymene. 'And he's *our* king. Everyone says he's dead. They don't say so in front of Penelope because they're frightened of making her even sadder than she is now, but that's what they're saying. Odysseus is never coming back.'

'He is. He's not dead,' Ikarios said. 'That's kitchen gossip. Telemachus told me he knows his father's alive.'

'He doesn't know anything. He's showing off, that's all. And comforting himself, I expect, too.'

She kicked a little sand up with her foot, trying not to send it in her brother's direction. All the boys on Ithaka, their island, where Odysseus ruled before

he went off to the war, did nothing but play at being heroes. Klymene thought that these games weren't proper games at all, but excuses for rolling around, wrestling and fighting, and she couldn't understand why the boys enjoyed them so much.

As though he had read her thoughts, Ikarios said, 'Playing heroes is not as boring as playing princesses.'

Klymene shrugged. She could sometimes read what was in her twin's mind, and he had the same gift. Nana, their grandmother, said it was because they'd shared the same womb before they were born. They had grown from one seed, like a plant with two flowers blossoming on a single stalk. It meant that they could understand one another, but it didn't prevent her from sometimes being irritated by her brother's quietness and slowness and she often wished that she'd been born the boy. If I had, I could have been a fisherman like our father and sailed away from the shore all over the ocean, and I wouldn't have to waste my time in the kitchen, staring into pots to make sure the soup doesn't burn.

Klymene was happy to leave the war games to her brother and Telemachus, but she liked going with them when they explored the rocks above the town, or picked pears and figs from trees that grew in the orchards.

'You have my permission,' Telemachus often said, laughing, pretending that he was the king while Odysseus, his father, was absent, and that all the fruit growing on Ithaka was his to pluck from the trees and share with his friends.

Ikarios' voice interrupted Klymene's thoughts. 'You're thinking about Telemachus again,' he said.

'We were talking about him, that's why. We often talk about him. He's our friend.'

Ikarios said nothing. Klymene pushed at him with her foot. 'Come on,' she said. 'Stop being so annoying, Ikarios. You want to say one thing and you're saying another. Something's troubling you.'

'Not troubling me. Not really.'

'But?'

'But nothing. It's just . . .'

'Oh, come on, Ikarios. Getting you to talk is like squeezing juice from a lemon.'

Ikarios took a deep breath. 'You think of Telemachus all the time,' he said.

'I don't,' Klymene answered and then: 'and even if I do, what's wrong with that?'

'You love him. That's what I think.'

'Don't be ridiculous. I don't. At least, I do, but we're too young, Ikarios. We're not supposed to think about . . . well, such things.'

'But you do. Admit it, Klymene. Sometimes you do think of him in that way. You know what I mean.'

'Rubbish. Telemachus is like another brother to me. And to you, Ikarios, don't forget. Perhaps you're jealous. Have you thought of that? Maybe you think he likes me better than he likes you.'

Because Ikarios didn't answer, Klymene knew that what she'd said was true. She'd only said it to move attention away from herself, but now she understood. Ikarios feels left out, she thought. She was searching

in her mind for something to say that would change the subject, when her twin spoke.

'Maybe if we found a piece of wood the right size,' he said, 'we could make a wooden horse, just like the one Odysseus filled with soldiers. The one that the stupid Trojans took into their city.'

'I don't want to make a wooden horse,' said Klymene, trying not to sound too bored. She was grateful to her brother, whose thoughts often mirrored her own, for deciding to talk about something else. 'We've made hundreds of wooden horses and I'm sick of it.'

'You stay here, then, and I'll go alone. I won't be long. There's always wood along here somewhere.'

As Ikarios went off across the sand, Klymene looked at the ocean. The sun was a little higher now, and where its light fell on the water, the green and blue became sparkles of gold. She knew why she enjoyed playing princesses: it was because she felt as though she really *was* one. Odysseus' wife, Penelope, had treated her like a daughter ever since she'd been a baby, and she'd spent more of her time in the royal chambers than in her grandmother's apartment, which sometimes led to quarrels. Nana's my own mother's mother, Klymene told herself, so of course I love her, but she annoys me and irritates me sometimes, and I like being with Penelope and helping her much better than I like working in the kitchen with Nana.

Behind her, rocks and scrubby grass and olive trees with their trunks pushed close to the earth by the

force of the winds grew along the path that she and Ikarios took when they came down to the shore. It led through the town and up a long sloping hill through clusters of small dwellings. At the top of the hill stood the palace. Its enormous wooden gates were always open, by order of Penelope, in case her husband should return unexpectedly.

Ikarios and I, Klymene thought, are like Telemachus' brother and sister. We've always done everything together. He was only one year old when we were born, and because our mother died before we were weaned we were all looked after together.

'How could the Gods take my daughter from me?' Nana still cried sometimes, covering her white hair with a black scarf so that you couldn't see her eyes. 'A fever burned her up and she is now in Hades with the Immortals and lost to us in this life.'

Not having a mother was sad, but she couldn't remember her properly. She dreamed sometimes of a tall, dark woman bending over her bed, and in the dream there was singing, but it faded away as soon as she woke up. She thought that her twin saw their mother in his sleep too, but he never spoke of it.

Ikarios mourned for their father, Halios, who had been one of the best fishermen on the island, bringing silver fish to the town and the palace in a boat that had black eyes painted on the prow. He had drowned in a terrible storm when his children were five years old. His body had never been found. Klymene missed him too, but not as much as her brother did. She'd never told anyone how frightened she had often been

of the big, hairy man who used to toss her up in the air like a doll to show his love.

'Still mooning over Telemachus?' said Ikarios.

'Don't be so pathetic. I see you've found your wood.'

'Are you going to help me, then?'

'No, I feel like going to look in the cave.'

'Do you mean the cave of the Naiads?' said Ikarios. 'We're forbidden to go there. Nana'll shout at us.'

'I'm not going to tell her. Are you?'

'What if something bad happens?' Ikarios said.

'It won't. You always think things will happen. You just sit and wait for the Gods to throw something at you from Olympus.'

'Sssh!' said Ikarios. 'What if they hear you?'

'I'm not being disrespectful to *them*. It's you. You're silly. I'm going for a walk. I won't go to the cave, don't worry. I'll go in the opposite direction.'

She set off across the sand. In the distance there was a small outcrop of smooth rocks and beyond them, if you climbed over into the next bay, a place where the shells lay thick near the water line and you could gather spotted ones, and pearly ones, and sometimes huge, spiky ones that were pale pink in their deepest, most hidden parts. She thought about what Ikarios had said about the Gods and wondered, not for the first time, whether her twin had ever seen a God. I've never spoken to him about it, she thought, because I'm not sure it's true, but I've seen things. She shook her head. She would never tell anyone that she thought she'd sometimes seen the Gods themselves, in case

the dwellers on Olympus punished her for her presumption. And what if those things she thought were manifestations of divinity were nothing but a kind of dream? She'd look a fool if she spoke of them.

Klymene's feet made wet prints in the damp sand, and she looked over her shoulder to see how the waves smoothed them away. The rocks were easy to clamber on to, but still, she was careful where she trod. Soon she could see the whole of the next bay.

Two women stood at the edge of the water. Klymene recognized one of them. It's Antikleia, she thought, and then: it can't be. Why would an old, old lady come down to the beach so early in the morning? And who is with her?

She hesitated, wondering what she ought to do. Would it be impertinent to go and speak to them? Something about the way they were standing, something about the silence everywhere and the stillness of the water stopped her. Every wave was taking much longer than it usually did to travel across the sand. Could that be?

Suddenly the air above Klymene's head darkened. She turned to look back at the distant figure of her brother, and where he was the sky was still blue and the sun shone on bright water. The figures of Antikleia and her friend hadn't moved, but the waves at their feet . . . Klymene shivered as she stared at them. Maybe it's an earthquake coming, she thought. Poseidon shaking the island, as he did sometimes when he was angered. Even though she wanted to run away, she couldn't take her eyes off what was happening to the

sea. It had ebbed, as though gathering itself into a giant breaker, and then it had parted, divided, and now instead of a flat, shining surface, the water was heaped up into two towering masses higher than a house, walls of translucent blue and green in which fishes and seaweed were trapped like flies in amber. In between the two cliffs of solid ocean lay what looked like a wide, white path, a carpet of sand.

Klymene climbed down from the rocks and began to walk towards the women. I might be dreaming, she thought. I might wake up in my own bed and this, all of it, will vanish. She couldn't see the sun, and yet what surrounded her was not darkness but a light that shone strange and livid, as if the air had turned to metal.

The woman standing next to Antikleia turned and started to walk towards Klymene. Oh, Ikarios, help me, she thought. Come and find me. Who is she? What if she's angry with me for being here? Should I run away? I can't. I can't move. Maybe I should scream and then he'd come. Klymene blinked as the woman approached. She was tall and wore a gown of shimmering bronze. Her eyes were clear and grey and as she made her way along the beach, a white owl flew above her head, following where she led.

'There is nothing to fear, child,' said the woman, putting out a hand to touch Klymene on the shoulder. 'Antikleia is weary of her life. She is going down to the Kingdom of the Dead.'

'But she can't!' Klymene burst out. 'She's Odysseus' mother. How will she go to Hades when she isn't sick

or mortally wounded? Who are you anyway? If you were a friend to Antikleia you'd help her. Let me go to her, I implore you. What'll Odysseus say if he comes back from the war to find his mother dead?'

'I am Odysseus' friend,' said the woman, and her voice was like a song in Klymene's ears. 'His most caring helper. It is Antikleia's fate, and you can do nothing to prevent it. Watch now, and remember.'

Klymene gazed at Antikleia. The old woman took her cloak from her shoulders and laid it on the sand as tidily as if she were preparing herself for sleep. Then she walked slowly, calmly along the white path, the way that led between the water-cliffs.

'I can't see her any longer,' Klymene cried. 'Where's she going?'

'She will be safe in the realm of Poseidon,' said the woman. 'The fishes will take her down and down, and she will know nothing of sorrow any longer. You must tell them, tell them at the palace, how gently she died. Tell her husband, Odysseus' father Laertes. He will mourn her and cry for her, but you must tell him.'

A sound filled Klymene's head like a thousand horses at once drumming their hooves on the earth. She put her hands up to cover her ears and saw the glassy walls of water shifting and moving and swelling and she held her breath as they crashed together and broke in a fountain of foam that seemed almost to touch the dark sky and hang in the air before it fell back to the shore again, and broke on the beach in a line of gigantic waves that roared up as far as the path to the city, and ebbed back and back and broke

again, over and over, till Klymene was deafened with the noise of it and shivering with fear.

'The sea is calmer now,' said the woman. The owl had settled on her shoulder with its white wings folded. 'Antikleia is lost to this world. Go and tell them at the palace, child. Tell them Athene guided her.'

'Pallas Athene is a Goddess,' said Klymene and the woman smiled.

'Recognize her, then.'

Klymene sank to her knees. How could she not have seen? How did she not know at once? Of course – this tall lady with the owl on her shoulder. Of course it was.

'Lady,' she breathed, and bent down with her head on the sand, her mind racing, as she wondered what she would tell Ikarios. Would he believe her? Would anyone? When she raised her head, Pallas Athene had disappeared. Klymene looked all around, but the only sign that the Goddess had spoken to her was the sight of the white owl, disappearing towards the horizon. Klymene got to her feet and began to run to the rocks, back to Ikarios, shouting as she went.

'Ikarios! She's dead! Antikleia's gone. She drowned. Ikarios, come, we have to tell them at the palace. Pallas Athene says we have to tell them.'

He couldn't hear her, she knew. She was still too far away, but some sound must have reached him because he was looking at her. Should she have mentioned the Goddess? It was too late now. She half slid, half jumped down the rocks as quickly as she could, and then raced across the sand to where her brother

was digging a trench around the sandy citadel of Troy he'd made.

'What're you on about? Pallas Athene! The sun's gone to your head.'

'She was there. On the beach with Antikleia.'

'What did she look like then? Tell me.'

'I can't remember exactly. There was an owl. A white owl. And I remember Antikleia walking between two walls of water down to the kingdom of Poseidon. Oh, come on, Ikarios, we must tell them. Come quickly.'

'I'm not going to tell anyone that a person's drowned till I've seen a body.'

Klymene stamped her foot. 'You're an idiot. I *told* you. She walked into the water. She's gone to Hades. There isn't going to be a body.'

'Well then, I want to see the place. Show me, go on. And then I'll come with you to the palace.'

Klymene turned and ran back to the rocks. 'Come on then, if you're going to be obstinate. It won't do any good. There won't be anything there.'

Ikarios went first and Klymene followed. At the top of the outcrop, he stopped and pointed.

'What's that, then?' he said. A black shape lay on the beach, half in, half out of the water, with small waves breaking over it.

'I don't know. A log. A fallen tree. Rubbish.'

'It isn't,' Ikarios said. He made his way down from the rocks and began to walk across the sand. Klymene followed him. She knew he was right. It was a body, and as they approached she recognized the black fabric

of the robes swirling around it. Poseidon had left the corpse here so that funeral rites could be performed.

'It's her,' she told her brother. 'It's Antikleia. Now do you believe me?'

'Yes,' said Ikarios. They were standing over the body now. 'Should we turn her over? I don't want to look at her, but surely we can't leave her lying with her face in the sand?'

'Turn her over, then, if you're so brave,' said Klymene. 'I think we should run. We have to tell them.'

'I daren't,' Ikarios whispered. 'The dead look at you without seeing you. I'm frightened, Klymene.'

Klymene sighed. She wanted nothing more than to be safe in the palace, cool in the shade, away from this beach and the blinding sun, which was burning the back of her neck now. But Ikarios was right. The old lady ought to be facing the sky. She bent down and held her breath.

'Help me, at least,' she said. 'She can't hurt us. Her spirit will be grateful for our kindness. Help me to turn her.'

Together, the twins turned the body over.

'Oh, it's horrible,' Ikarios said. 'Her skin is so white and slippery and her eyes are like stones. She's staring at us, Klymene. Look!'

'Come on,' Klymene whispered, covering the old woman's face with a corner of her own sodden garments, unable to gaze at her any longer. 'Run. Run faster than you've ever run before.'

Ikarios set off at once up the path to the palace,

with Klymene behind him. Even though no one in the town could hear them, she started to shout: 'Help! The old queen is drowned. Help us! A drowning on the beach. Help!'