

# ***Show Me the Way to Go Home***

**by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988**

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It was the night the orchestra played *Show Me the Way to Go Home*, the night the fleet sailed for Panama. The slow drizzle of rain had stopped, and there was nothing but the play of searchlights across the clouds, the mutter of the motors from the shore boats, and the spatter of grease where the man was frying hamburgers on the Fifth Street landing. I was standing there with a couple of Greek fishermen and a taxi driver, watching the gobs say good-bye to their wives and sweethearts.

There was something about the smell of rain, the sailors saying good-bye, and the creak of rigging that sort of got to you. I'd been on the beach for a month then.

A girl came down to the landing and leaned on the rail watching the shore boats. One of the gobs waved at her, and she waved back, but didn't smile. You could see that they didn't know each other; it was just one of those things.

She was alone. Every other girl was with somebody, but not her. She was wearing a neat, tailored suit that was a little worn, but she had nice legs and large, expressive eyes. When the last of the shore boats was leaving she was still

standing there. Maybe it wasn't my move, but I was lonely, and when you're on the beach you don't meet many girls. So I walked over and leaned on the rail beside her.

„Saying good-bye to your boyfriend?” I asked, though I knew she wasn't.

„I said good-bye to him a long time ago.”

„He didn't come back?”

„Do they ever?”

„Sometimes they want to and can't. Sometimes things don't break right.”

„I wonder.”

„And sometimes they do come back and things aren't like they were, and sometimes they don't come back because they are afraid they won't be the same, and they don't want to spoil what they remember.”

„Then why go?”

„Somebody has to. Men have always gone to sea, and girls have waited for them.”

„I'm not waiting for anybody.”

„Sure you are. We all are. From the very beginning we wait for somebody, watch for them long before we know who they are. Sometimes we find the one we wait for, sometimes we don't. Sometimes the one we wait for comes along and we don't know it until too late. Sometimes they ask too much and we are afraid to take a chance, and they slip away.”

„I wouldn't wait for anyone. Especially him. I wouldn't want him now.”

„Of course not. If you saw him now, you'd wonder why you ever wanted him. You aren't waiting for him, though—you're waiting for what he represented. You knew a sailor once. Girls should never know men who have the sea in their blood.”

„They always go away.”

„Sure, and that's the way it should be. All the sorrow and tragedy in life come from trying to make things last too long.”

„You're a cynic.”

„All sentimentalists are cynics, and all Americans are sentimentalists. It's the Stephen Foster influence. Or too many showings of *Over the Hill to the Poorhouse* and *East Lynne*. But I like it that way.”

„Do people really talk like this?”

„Only when they need coffee. Or maybe the first time a girl and a man meet. Or maybe this talk is a result of the saying good-bye influence. It's the same thing that makes women cry at the weddings of perfect strangers.”

„You're a funny person.” She turned to look at me.

„I boast of it. But how about that coffee? We shouldn't stand here much longer. People who lean on railings over water at night are either in love or contemplating suicide.”

We started up the street. This was the sort of thing that made life interesting—meeting people. Especially attractive blondes at midnight.

Over the coffee she looked at me. „A girl who falls in love with a sailor is crazy.”

„Not at all. A sailor always goes away, and then she doesn't have time to be disillusioned. Years later she can make her husband's life miserable telling him what a wonderful man so-and-so was. The chances are he was a fourteen-carat sap. Only he left before the new wore off.”

„Is that what you do?”

„Very rarely. I know all the rules for handling women. The trouble is that at the psychological moment I forget to use them. It’s depressing.”

„It’s getting late. I’m going to have to go home.”

„Not alone, I hope.”

She looked at me again, very coolly. „You don’t think I’m the sort of girl you can just pick up, do you?”

„Of course not,” I chuckled. „But I wished on a star out there. You know that old gag.”

She laughed. „I think you’re a fool.”

„That cinches it. Women always fall in love with fools.”

„You think it is so easy to fall in love as that?”

„It must be. Some people fall in love with no visible reason, either material, moral, or maternal. Anyway, why should it be so complicated?”

„Were you ever in love?”

„I think so. I’m not exactly sure. She was a wonderful cook, and if the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, this was a case of love at first bite.”

„Do you ever take anything seriously?”

„I’m taking you seriously. But why not have a little fun with it? There’s only one thing wrong with life: people don’t love enough, they don’t laugh enough—and they are too damned conventional. Even their love affairs are supposed to run true to form. But this is spontaneous. You walk down where the sailors are saying good-bye to their sweethearts because you said good-bye to one once. It has been raining a little, and there is a sort of melancholy tenderness in the air. You are remembering the past, not because of him, because his face and personality have faded, but because of the romance of saying good-bye, the smell of strange odors from foreign ports, the thoughts the ocean always brings to people—romance, color, distance. A sort of vague sadness that is almost a happiness. And then, accompanied by the sound of distant music and the perfume of frying onions, I come into your life!”

She laughed again. „That sounds like a line.”

„It is. Don’t you see? When you went down to the landing tonight you were looking for me. You didn’t know who I was, but you wanted something, someone. Well, here I am. The nice part of it is, I was looking for you.”

„You make it sound very nice.”

„Why not? A man who couldn’t make it sound nice while looking at you would be too dull to live. Now finish your coffee and we’ll go home.”

„Now listen, I...”

„I know. Don’t say it. But I’ll just take you to the door, kiss you very nicely, and close it.”

There had been another shower, and the streets were damp. A fog was rolling from the ocean, the silent mist creeping in around the corners of the buildings, encircling the ships to the peaks of their masts. It was a lonely, silent world where the streetlights floated in ghostly radiance.

„You were wondering why men went to sea. Can’t you imagine entering a strange, Far Eastern port on such a night as this? The lights of an unknown city—

strange odors, mysterious sounds, the accents of a strange tongue? It's the charm of the strange and the different, of something new. Yet there's the feeling around you of something very old. Maybe that's why men go to sea."

„Maybe it is, but I'd never fall in love with another sailor."

„I don't blame you."

We had reached the door. She put her key in the lock, and we stepped in. It was very late, and very quiet. I took her in my arms, kissed her goodnight, and closed the door.

„I thought you said you were going to say goodnight, and then go?" she protested.

„I said I was going to kiss you good night, and then close the door. I didn't say on which side of it I'd be."

„Well..."

The hell of it was my ship was sailing in the morning.

