

HESTER KAPLAN

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## LOVESICK

FROM AN OPPOSITE BENCH ON THE BOAT'S lower deck, Bowman Starr saw his wife Claudia place her hand on his stepdaughter's belly, and knew that what grew there was not simply a baby, but his own uncertainty. Soon, a line for the snack bar blocked his view, and he saw instead bodies in their happy procession, coffee cups and foamy Buds held aloft. He knew he looked like these other day travelers on the Harbor Queen in his salmon-colored golf shirt, Nikes without socks, and the extra pounds that had arrived with his forty-third birthday, but he wasn't nearly as sure-footed as they were. An instant of Claudia was revealed in the sway, and seasickness suddenly rose under his tongue like a dirty word.

He took the stairs to the airy upper level, and recalled how Claudia had asked him to come to Provincetown with her and Mariah today. They'd had such a good time on their last trip there, she'd said while they were still in bed. Her coyness had made him embarrassed for both of them that morning, because it hadn't been a good time, and she knew it too. But a crease from the pillow was still mapped across her cheek, her nightgown had fallen off one sweet shoulder, and he'd felt too much in love with her and her asking to say anything but yes.

Now that visit, four years earlier, came back to Bowman in the same way moments of childhood humiliation revisit the grown man; fully lit, and reanimated by expectation that things will play out differently this time. Hope made his knees loosen without warning and he sat. He

noticed that the red benches were arranged like pews and the silvery sky was a dome above the Harbor Queen, up where the air was carbonated with prayer. The woman next to him was wearing white high-heeled sandals, impractical, optimistic shoes, and her eyes were closed in her own romantic invocation.

In every other direction there was boundless ocean and no horizon, and Bowman felt the rise and drop of the boat beneath him. The water had been choppy the last time too, but seasickness hadn't even occurred to him then. He and Claudia had been married for only two years at that point, and he still kept an anxious eye on his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, a girl who was a gift to him when his life had seemed so perilously giftless before. She'd laughed as the boat rolled from side to side, her sneakers rose from the deck, and her hair lifted. When he'd had enough of imagining she was about to be pitched overboard and sucked into the purple waves, he'd pulled her back. She'd teased him about it, and it had shocked Bowman, this hard, sassy affection she had for him. Claudia had been up on deck too that day instead of down with the drunks and the diesel fumes. She was just pregnant then, luminous and sleepy. Bowman had whispered to her how Provincetown, as it burned into view, glittered like a rich host eager to please, and he'd let his mouth linger by her ear.

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The woman in the white sandals left the upper deck and the boat slinked into the harbor until its final, rubbery bump against the dock. Bowman was the last to get off, and as he moved towards Claudia and Mariah standing on the dock, he discovered that the day was already simmering with only the feeblest of July breezes at his neck. He saw Mariah's wide face, her dark-berry mouth, and the way her shoulders squared towards him. The sun melted in her inky hair, reminding him that her real father was a Pequot Indian, a bum, and a bastard. It reminded him too, un-easily, that his wife's past would never be entirely known to him.

Claudia waved, and the monument behind her seemed to bend in the heat's distortion, its triangular point skewering a single cloud. She was

pale where Mariah was dark, abbreviated where her daughter was tall – and he was big enough to fit them both in his arms. It was the similarity of their expressions that amazed Bowman; today the look was indulgent but also slightly impatient, as if wandering off was something he tended to do. But if Mariah said everything that came into her head and never waited for anything, not caution or consideration, Claudia was a tight package, lifting only an occasional corner to reveal what was inside. Today she had a thick, sensible smear of white zinc on her lips and an itinerary in her head.

“Where’d you go?” she asked. Their feet sucked at the tar of MacMillan Wharf as they walked towards town.

“Checking out the view,” Bowman explained. “Getting some air.”

“Queasy,” Claudia suggested. “You’re a little green around the edges. You should have eaten breakfast.”

“So, did you see anything?” Mariah asked.

Bowman would have liked to surprise her by saying that he’d seen something extraordinary, but he only shrugged. On their left, they passed the fidgeting lines for whale watching tours and deep-sea fishing expeditions. Bowman hesitated – and in that instant, a brochure was slipped between his fingers. I could easily be lured away today, he thought, feeling the pull of bad judgment and the blue-green tide.

“What do you girls say?” Bowman asked.

Mariah bumped his shoulder with hers. “Rip-offs, Bowman,” she warned, redirecting him. “Don’t even think about it.”

She wore his Larry Bird basketball shirt over a bikini top. It hung loose at the arms and pulled like a neon green skin over her belly. Eighteen, he thought, with no husband, no boyfriend, not even a fucking father for this kid, just a few college credits and a full moon of baby rising over the waist of her bicycle shorts. Knocked-up; Claudia hated when he used the word, but there it was to be used. (She’d been eighteen and pregnant once, too.) In the spring, Bowman had begun to turn away from the sight of his ever-expanding stepdaughter, even as they talked and he offered her orange juice, a bagel. Evenings, he retreated to the cool of the garage, with its all-business male adornments and the neighborhood viewed through an open door. He wasn’t sure of the true nature of his snappish discomfort with the pregnant Mariah, but was fearful of its suggestions.

"Maybe next time," Claudia consoled, nodding towards the boats, "but not today, okay? I thought we'd climb the monument this morning."

As she steered them left onto Commercial Street, fumes from the foot-long hot dog pit blew at Bowman, rousing his seasickness again. He knew Claudia wouldn't buy anything for herself on this trip — she was tight with money, left over from her years as a single mother — but would explain away this deprivation by declaring there were no deals in a tourist trap like this. She wouldn't be taken. A few waxy wads of salt water taffy, maybe a fan of postcards she'd end up doling out to her second-graders in the fall. But right away, she marched into a souvenir shop, and Mariah followed. Bowman waited outside and watched the thick parade of people. Last time he'd been in Provincetown, disease had decimated the place, blown through town like the final, great party, leaving the streets echoing and scattered with garbage. The men who'd wrapped arms around each other's waists did so not out of affection, he'd decided, but terror. And in the midst of this, he'd allowed himself to imagine pushing his baby down the street on his next visit. There was nothing cold-hearted or selfish about it. His kid would be evidence of Bowman Starr's — of life's — determination to survive. Now the place was packed once more with all types of body, and everywhere people were dodging, putting things into their mouths, gorging themselves on sweets and flesh and free AC. Childless, he was suddenly ravenous too, crossed the street and bought himself a three-scoop mint chocolate chip ice cream cone.

When Claudia reappeared, she cast a disapproving eye at Bowman's ice cream, and then showed him the tiny shirt with a glittering picture of a clam on it. Impending grandmotherhood had caused her to develop wildly bad taste all of a sudden, he'd noticed, and the house was filling with her stockpiles for this kid, stashes of pastel in drawers and closets.

Bowman handed Mariah his cone and absently picked at the sparkles on the shirt with his thumbnail. "Looks like a girl's shirt to me," he said. "You so sure this kid's a she?"

Claudia took the shirt back and folded it as small as a sandwich. "What difference does it make? I think it's adorable," she said, but by the way she turned it over in her hand, Bowman knew she was thinking she might have made a mistake. Why, he asked himself, had he felt the need to say anything at all?

"That's bullshit," Mariah announced, her mouth glossy with his ice cream. "Your shirt's pink. Are you a girl? I'll give my boy a tutu if he

asks. You have to let kids do what they want.”

“Excellent idea. I say let them make all the rules too,” Bowman said. The chocolate chips left an unpleasant waxiness in his mouth. “Let me know how it works out.”

Mariah rolled her eyes, tossed the still full cone into the garbage, and walked ahead. Bowman saw how proud she was of the way she looked, belly thrust out, hair swinging defiantly. Her pregnancy was like the kids’ game of sticking a pillow and two oranges under your shirt; to Mariah, it seemed not much more than that. Claudia sighed and hiked her bag high on her shoulder.

“Nice job,” she said. “A terrific start. Why do you have to do that?”

“But do you see how crazy this is?” Bowman asked. “Does she think anything through? And my ice cream?”

“What I was hoping for today —” Claudia began. “What I was hoping for,” she repeated in a tone hardened with warning, “was a day when you’re not angry at her, because this baby’s coming whether you like it or not. It’s your choice.”

Claudia turned to look at a slice of water revealed in the narrowest space between two buildings and then took off after Mariah.

**H**E RECALLED THE FIRST TIME HE’D GONE to Claudia’s apartment in Mount Pleasant. Until then, their dates had been informational, the necessary laying out of habits and histories. That night they’d talked softly — the daughter he had yet to meet was asleep down the hall. Bowman admired the clean efficiency of Claudia’s life, her place, and the way she managed as a single mother. He imagined she was so careful with things that they never wore out, an imagining that was mostly love by then and little awe. That Claudia lived on the least-secure first floor, her door festooned with locks and chains, seemed to Bowman a vulnerability even she had not been able to avoid, and it made his heart pound to think he could fix this much, put her in a house with two stories and a bedroom overlooking a yard.

Claudia’s feet had pressed against his thigh as they sat on the couch. He touched her lacquered nails, the one on her baby toe as small as a seed. Occasionally she giggled and told a story on herself, but her face, profiled in the silver light from the television was tense and purposeful. Until that night, he assumed his chance for passion had wasted all its opportunities; romance had left him mystified, and his bachelor-

hood made him suspect in every way. Later as he pressed Claudia against the wall just outside her bedroom, he said he was in love with her and he thought he felt her control crumble under his hands.

“Stop.” She pushed him away, her palm against his chest. “One thing.”

“Yes, you are the one thing,” he said, finding himself not unhandsome and hugely romantic all of a sudden. Why shouldn’t he finally be able to say these things? She opened the door to her daughter’s room where the girl was asleep, facing them.

“Just so you know, you can’t spend the night,” Claudia whispered.

This introduction of her child into their foreplay was confusing. He didn’t know what to say; he’d never slept with a mother. Claudia ran her hand down his back, suspended one electric finger at the fork of his ass. A dim light from the kitchen moved restlessly on her cheek. A jewel had been revealed to him in the form of the sleeping girl, and he understood then that someday she might belong to him. He urged Claudia’s hand to continue, and thought, this is a woman who doesn’t need me — look at her life alone, tidy and economical, and rich in ways mine isn’t — but maybe simply wants me, and in his mind, want was something much more rare and valuable.

**L**ET’S GET YOU A NEW BATHING SUIT,” Bowman said to Claudia when he caught up to her, moving his hands to her front, tucking his fingertips into the waistband of her shorts, his mouth in her hair. She had stopped in front of BodyBody, a store whose windows were filled with pale, headless mannequins in neon suits, their nipples like gumdrops. He pressed himself into her, hopeful again.

“Oh, Bowman, I don’t want to try anything on now,” she said, but by the way she leaned back into him, he knew she wanted to be convinced. “It’s too hot, don’t you think?”

“You’ll take your clothes off.”

When Mariah, who had stopped a few feet beyond, walked back to them, Claudia moved so that Bowman’s fingers slipped from her. “We’re going to buy your mother something,” he announced. “Something glamorous and sexy. Pink with zippers, gold, maybe, impractical, expensive.”

“You can’t actually swim in any of these things, you know. They’d fall apart instantly.” Claudia reapplied zinc to her lips and examined her

reflection in the window. "God, I look ridiculous. Oh, what the hell— here goes." She passed her bag over her shoulder to her daughter and went inside.

Bowman and Mariah followed and sat on a bench. The girl sucked in clipped, shocked breaths, and when her knees banged together, Bowman heard the sound of bone against bone. It made his stomach surge in fear for her.

"You okay?" he asked. Sweat glossed the skin below his eyes and above his lip. "You're breathing funny."

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"Don't look so worried. I'm fine. It was probably the mint chocolate chip," she said, fanning her face and smiling at him. "Totally disgusting."

"I wouldn't know." Bowman noticed how drips of ice cream dotted her shirt as if someone had drawn the white eyes and nose of her unborn baby. It made him feel enormously protective of her all of a sudden. "Look sweetheart, I'm sorry I haven't been so nice recently."

"Incorrect. You've been an asshole."

"I know, an asshole, but just tell me one thing, will you? What are you doing having a baby?"

Mariah let out a high, endearing laugh. "Now you're asking?"

"A little late, I know. Still."

Mariah glanced towards the dressing room as though she were about to reveal something she wasn't sure she should. "I wasn't at all positive what I was going to do at first." She hesitated. "I know you think I don't think about things, that I'm flighty. That I'm too young."

"The young part's true but not the rest," Bowman urged, cautious with the opening up his apology seemed to encourage. He watched Mariah rub an ancient scar on her knee, one she'd gotten long before they ever knew each other.

"I was going to have an abortion. I even made an appointment to get it

done." She patted her stomach. "I mean, do I need this? I got to the office and everything, but Mom wouldn't let up, crying, begging me. You know how she can be." Mariah looked at her feet, resigned to giving in to her mother. "But you know this already." Bowman shook his head. "Come on, I know Mom told you. Maybe you just blocked it or something," Mariah added lightly, as if to skip over this vast canyon they'd just come upon. "Anyway, I'm happy about it."

"Happy," Bowman repeated, but dullness had invaded him, as if he'd always been hunched on this bench watching his life take place without him. No, there hadn't been any discussion with him about this baby, just the fact of it presented to him along with pork chops and rice one night by Claudia, and later all manner of logic from her. It's Mariah's decision, she'd said, and she wants this baby very much.

Bowman watched his wife's feet move under the dressing room door as she bent to take off her shorts and then again to put on her suit. When it caught at her ankle, she stopped, her hands clutching the silver cloth. It seemed that she stood forever in that awkward pose and Bowman knew self-consciousness had crowded into the tiny space with her and said *no new suit for you, nothing special*. Bowman pictured her naked body, the hard ladder of her ribcage, the knuckles of her backbone, tiny breasts, pubic hair the color of toast, a body hardly changed by motherhood it had happened so young. She pointed her foot and slid the bathing suit off again. It was unnamable, this slither of cloth against his wife's skin, this denying for her and for him. He felt no particular yearning for her at the moment, just a surprisingly familiar sense of disappointment.

"We tried to have a kid," Bowman said to Mariah while Claudia was still in the dressing room, her feet seemingly affixed to the floor.

Mariah nodded. "She told me."

"I don't know why it didn't happen," Bowman said, as though he were telling an old story. "A big, fat fucking mystery."

The unexplained — and even today that cruel whisper of possibility that came with it — was like a constant wind in his skull. Claudia still allowed him to discover her babylessness month after month in the form of an open box of Tampax sitting on the back of the toilet. His hand rubbing her back — this was Bowman's wordless acknowledgment of the disappointment. And if she sometimes turned away from his comfort, well, why should he force her to say something when there was absolutely nothing new to say?



Claudia hadn't wanted to see a doctor, or have any tests done, but he'd had himself checked without telling her and had the results sent to his city hall office in Records and Licenses where he was the recorder and filer of everyone else's fortune and mistake. The report showed nothing wrong with him. The entire procedure made him feel like a criminal, his balls accessories to the crime. In the weeks after he got the results, he was determined to tell Claudia, but he developed a tiny stutter, and a habit of evasiveness she didn't seem to notice. He understood that there was possibly another truth to be revealed if he told — that Claudia didn't really want a child with him at all — and what would he do with that? After a while, he'd managed to convince himself that he had no business wanting a baby so much anyway, that it was freakish, a misfiring in his brain of some sort, a feminine, feathery side of his heart he shouldn't expose. A man with a wife and daughter and career was not supposed to ache for a child at the end of the day when he stared up at the ceiling, when he felt his sleeping wife's hip roll against his.

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"She just couldn't do another baby." Mariah patted his knee, a placating, chilling gesture that made him stiffen. "But she's always saying how crazy you are about kids — and that you'll be crazy about this one when it's born. That this is a good thing for you."

"She couldn't do another baby," he repeated, watching his wife who had left the dressing room. Even today, he wasn't sure if it was failure or loss they suffered together, but it seemed to him now that he'd been angry at the wrong woman.

Claudia's face was flushed. "I tried them on and didn't like a single one of those suits. I don't know what kind of body they're made for, but it's definitely not mine." She glanced from Bowman to Mariah. "What are you two talking about?"

Bowman looked at her as though she might offer some explanation, but she was the one whose ghostly white lips were parted in expectation of an answer.

"You, actually," he told her. "We were talking about how you decided Mariah should have this baby because you won't have one yourself."

Claudia's face contracted, like a flower by a cold window. "This is supposed to be enough for me?" he asked, furiously.

**T**HEY LOST CLAUDIA OR MORE PRECISELY, as Mariah pointed out, Claudia had lost herself when she left the store. There were thousands of places for her to hide in this town. Bowman didn't think he'd been wrong for what he'd said to Claudia yet it didn't seem right that a man should ever let his wife get away from him like this. Bowman turned every few minutes to see that Mariah was not so much accompanying him on his foray up Commercial Street as she was dogging him a few steps behind, her face a little teary like a child aware she'd had some part in her mother's abrupt leaving. And of course, he had implicated her — "we were talking" he'd said, forcing the conspiracy.

Everything in Provincetown appeared mismatched to make a point, the leather store with its collection of cock rings hung in the window as jewelry next to the shop announcing a Gigantic Sale on Votives! There was the alluring blue of the bay nine-tenths obscured by tacky overbuilding. And there was always someone striding regally against the flow of people, determined to have the crowd part for him. Halfway down a set of stairs that led into a basement store, Bowman stopped. He was overheated and suddenly seized by a brilliant moment from the last trip, when it had seemed necessary to pull Claudia into this precise spot of shade.

"Let's stop for a minute," Mariah said, standing opposite him on the steps. "My feet are killing me."

Bowman shut his eyes. Claudia, always private, had been reluctant at first to kiss him in this semi-public place, but his grand passion, brought to life by the news that she was pregnant, was not something he wanted to control then. He had become the kind of man who kisses his wife in restaurants and at parties, who lives in a continual fog of expectation and gratitude. His fingers, his cheeks, even the tip of his penis had tingled then. When Claudia's mouth finally softened, and he was able to explore it with his tongue, she tasted both sweet and sour. He had really adored her that day, been ignited by happiness. Maybe that's all she'd had in mind when she'd brought him back here today, but she'd been wrong to do it this way. When Bowman opened his eyes, he saw that Mariah was watching him with a peculiar mix of sympathy and anger. Her fingers drummed against her belly in a flutter of tension.

"Forget this, Bowman. We'll meet her at the boat," she said, and took a step up towards the street. "I need something to drink. I'm dying here."

HE LED THEM TO THE BELL DECK, a dark bar set back from the street in a clapboard house. Above the door was a painting of a ship's captain in a yellow slicker steering a wheel and the words, 'And I have asked to be where no storms come.' Mariah pulled the door's rope handle and disappeared into the dark. At this pre-lunch hour, the place was empty except for a single man at the bar. The Bell Deck's nautical theme looked tired in the light coming through salt-dusted windows; its best face, if it had one, was at night. So was the bartender's who gave them a cool, unfriendly snap of his chin. When they sat down, he rang a small bell above a row of bottles, but made no move towards them.

"What do you think that bell means?" Bowman asked Mariah, and wondered if she knew she'd brought them to a gay bar. She shrugged while he felt compelled to talk and talk. "What's a bell deck anyway? The bell's probably some kind of code for tourists—one ring to raise the prices, two for shitty service, three for salmonella."

"Yeah, probably." Mariah rested her hands flat in front of her, as if drawing gloss from the wood. "Excuse me," she called to the bartender.

He turned around, glancing quickly at the man at the end of the bar. "My father here thinks your bell is some kind of secret code."

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The bartender arched his eyebrows. "What can I get you?"

Mariah ordered a ginger ale, Bowman a beer and a cherry for her drink. Mariah sullenly plopped the cherry into a smeary ashtray.

"Some day this is turning out to be. You're right though—we'll meet your mother at the boat if we don't find her before then. She has the tickets so we're not going anywhere without her." Bowman laughed lightly. "She might decide to go somewhere without us, though."

Mariah finished her drink quickly and Bowman motioned for the bartender. He wanted to get her another soda and maybe something to eat; he sensed a slight desperation in her. But the bartender only rang the bell again and didn't move to take his order. It wasn't menace Bowman was picking up from the place, but exclusion and the distinct possibility of shame. He smelled it all around him now like the sour stench of the dishwasher drifting from the kitchen. The beer slunk into his

stomach. He felt the first jolt of alcohol behind his eyes and the inadvisability of drinking on a roiling, empty stomach.

"Stupid," Bowman mumbled. "What a stupid place this is. No service?"

"I got it." Mariah said, fiercely alert. "The bell means you're one of them. You know Bowman, a fag. You're a guy in a pink shirt — one ring means you're looking for a blowjob. Two means —"

"Jesus, Mariah. What are you doing?"

"Well?" Her voice cracked with unhappiness. "You deserve it. How could you say that to her? You took what I said completely wrong. It's not what I meant at all."

"You said she just couldn't do a baby with me. How was I meant to take it?"

"That she couldn't."

"No, she didn't want to. That's all."

Mariah looked at the glass in her hands. "It doesn't have anything to do with wanting. She got some infection when she was pregnant with me and it completely scarred up her insides. She's known it forever, since I was born. There was no way she was ever going to get pregnant again."

Bowman was strangely calm, as though the wind inside him had died down. He thought he could hear the parts of his mind file into order, the waves in his stomach lie flat. Claudia had lived recklessly once; she'd fallen for the wrong guy at eighteen and after that, she'd lived safely, always orchestrating and dodging. The man had only been around long enough to get her pregnant, but he'd left her with her whole life: this daughter. "Your father?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" Mariah said. "I shouldn't have told you any of this. I promised her I wouldn't, I swore. But you didn't understand."

Though he knew he should feel some sympathy for his wife and what she'd suffered, he couldn't. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"Ashamed, I guess," Mariah said, without looking at him. "And she didn't want you to leave us. She didn't totally understand why you would want to be with her in the first place, a woman with a kid. But

God, Bowman, what would be so bad about you loving this baby and taking care of it?"

His nausea came back with surprising force as though it had only been gathering strength. It tipped Bowman off his stool, pushed him to the door with the rope handle, and led him to the alley behind the Bell Deck with the dumpster and the puddles of milky water. He leaned with his hands on his knees and threw up a morning's seasickness, and with it, a family's lode of lovesickness.

**H**E MOUNTED THE BLISTERING HILL to the monument where he bought a ticket outside the gift shop. He took the stone steps up and focused on the predictable, rhythmic strain he felt in his thighs as he climbed. At the three-quarter mark sign, he stopped at a wide window cut directly into the stone. He could see everything from the gloriously windy height, the town spread out below, the cut in the dock where the Harbor Queen would arrive and leave again. He knew he should also imagine he could see his wife and stepdaughter together down there, but he didn't want to. He was aware of people moving behind him, a blend of voices and scents continuing on the stair's twist. He pressed his hands into the stone on either side of the view, tested his weight against the belts of chain that held him back from the temptation to slide himself over and take a thoughtless, delirious soar on the summer air. He was responsible for no one, and his stomach finally felt clean, a hollow, gleaming space inside him.

On the boat ride home from Provincetown four years earlier, the sun had slipped behind the clouds in the afternoon, the temperature had taken a dive and the air was needled with moisture. Claudia, shivering in a sundress, had touched her head, then her stomach in a confusion of discomforts Bowman believed were about the baby. She had gone down below, leaving Bowman and Mariah on the upper deck to gorge themselves on a half-pound bag of fudge. When she didn't come back, Bowman went to look for his wife, leaving Mariah with instructions not to stand too close to the railing. He found Claudia coming out of the bathroom, wiping her hands on a paper towel long after they were dry. She was pale, and had tucked her hair sharply behind her ears as if she'd been examining herself in the mirror.

"I should have brought a sweater," she said, as if that were the full text of her uneasiness. Bowman wiped his own sticky hands on his pants. He intended to wrap his arms around her. "Cramps," she explained. "I have a little chill."

She rubbed his arm and looked out the wet window that was so low to

the water it seemed possible a fish might look back at her. Bowman thought she was about to say everything was fine, that these cramps were part of pregnancy, queasiness, the weather, the stench of the boat, but she didn't. She was edgy to go to the upper deck and check on her daughter, but Bowman remembered now that she had stayed down with him instead. It must have been her way of holding on to him, not to deprive him of hope, and not to tell him the truth that there never had been a baby and there never would be. It was what she was still doing.

**B**OWMAN TURNED BACK TO THE FINAL QUARTER of his ascent. The dusky spiral of the stairs ended in a cool, stone room punctuated by stone-framed windows and the gleaming brass of coin-operated telescopes. Scraps of garbage swirled in the windy corners. Up here, there was only the woman with the white sandals from the boat, and she was bent into one of the telescopes so that the backs of her thighs, where her dress rose, were taut. She'd taken off her sandals and abandoned them near the top step. Her heels were dotted with blisters like pearls, lustrous and pink.

There was a thickening to her middle and bare upper arms, a density of flesh that reminded Bowman of himself. She'd spent the day alone, he guessed, but there was something in her tossed shoes and swirling dress, her messy hair, that was still determined.

"What do you see?" he asked, but she didn't hear him as the whistle of wind swallowed his voice. "What do you see?" he shouted and took a few steps towards her.

The woman didn't move from the telescope at first, but then swiveled her head to look at him over her shoulder. If she recognized him from the boat, she didn't let on.

"The view," he said again. She shook her head and went back to the telescope. "Did you find what you were looking for? I saw you on the boat earlier, on the way over." He moved so that he was only feet from her, this person who'd been as hopeful as he had been at the start of the trip.

She turned slowly, and as she calculated his size, Bowman saw the fact that they were alone register on her face. All the cues and clues between people, those currents that allow one person to assess another correctly without words were sucked up in the wind's vacuum. She was afraid of him.

"I don't mean to scare you," he said.

"Leave me alone, please." Her voice was surprisingly clear; she'd only pretended not to hear him. She moved to pick up her shoes and hesitated as though trying to decide if she should put them on before fleeing down the stairs. She turned to look at him again. "Get the message? I'm not interested."

"That's not what I meant," he said. "I wasn't trying to—"

But the woman disappeared down the dark mouth of the stairs, her bare feet slapping the stone. Not trying to what? Bowman asked himself. Pick her up? Make her feel desired? He wondered if this heartsick confusion was what desperation felt like. He touched the telescope she'd been looking through and the eyepiece was still warm. The instrument hummed as the minutes she'd paid her quarters for wound down. The huge bulk of the thing, with its sweet odors of metal and oil, was poised at Bowman's chest, the barrel of it pointed down and over the town.

The lens was still open, but he didn't want to look towards the pier where he figured his wife and daughter had gone to wait for him though they had hours before the boat came. In a few minutes, he knew he would also see the woman with the white sandals moving towards the indifferent protection of the crowds. It made him sick to think he'd ruined the day for her and forced her to admit she'd always be alone. He didn't know what he would say to his wife when he finally met her on the wharf later, but he hoped as he put his eye to the telescope now, that it might lead him through the mysterious chambers of the human heart back to her.