

Maria Works at Ocean City Nails

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We're standing outside of Ocean City Nails, where Maria works,

when Bobby walks up. Bobby was always a fat kid. When he was younger his mother Patti, my dad's cousin, used to say that it was okay if he was a fat kid, that when he was a teenager he'd get tall and slim down. When he turned thirteen he started getting tall but he didn't slim down any. He's fifteen now, at least I think he's fifteen, and when he walks up he kind of jiggles all over. None of it's muscle.

"Sup," Nick says. It's me and Nick hanging with Leo while Leo's waiting for Maria to get off work.

"My dick," Bobby says. "Got to get me some tonight."

Bobby's always going on about getting some, acting bad. Like anyone would even give this fat fuck a handjob under the bleachers Friday night if they were so bored out of their fucking minds they could convince themselves it was a joke and better than being bored. He's shameless, though, totally fucking shameless, thinks it's funny, knows it's stupid, just goes right ahead. When the Demetrios twins started filling out he waited around after school just so he could follow them down the street to their uncle's restaurant and then come tell us how he followed them down the street to their uncle's restaurant and had to get himself some of that. He was such a hopeless fat fuck they didn't even complain to their uncle, who would have been happy to chop Bobby's balls off and serve them in a salad.

"My Big Fat Greek Pussy," Bobby would say to us and then laugh like it was funny.

"He just got out of the clinic," Nick says. "The one where the celebrities go for sex addiction. You a sex addict, Bobby?"

"Fuck yeah," Bobby says.

"Asshole," Leo says. Leo's never had any use for Bobby. I don't mean like the rest of us who know Bobby's a stupid fat fuck and don't pay any attention. I mean getting this wrong look on his face whenever Bobby's around. My grandmother Bataglia used to say that there was a difference between dislike and hostility. It's okay

to dislike someone, you can't be a human being and go through life without disliking some people, but you shouldn't feel hostile toward anyone. Then she'd quote something—she used to teach in a college—in this old form of Italian that even my dad, who spent a year back in Italy when he was about my age, didn't understand. She'd quote it like it meant something to anybody besides her. The point being that the rest of us kind of disliked Bobby if we thought of him at all, but Leo felt hostile toward him, and I never understood why. It's not like Bobby mouthed off about Leo's sisters, because he didn't have any, just the two older brothers, and one of them died in the war. And it's not like he talked shit about Maria. Nobody, including Leo, talked shit about Maria. Even stupid fat fuck Bobby understood that.

“Whose asshole? Yours?” Bobby says to Leo. “You got a personal problem? Something stuck up there?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Leo says.

Bobby laughs and doesn't notice Leo shifting his weight and clenching and unclenching his right fist, but I do, and I say, “So when is Maria getting off work?”

“Soon enough,” Leo says, his fist still clenched. Bobby's grinning like the fucking moron he is, hands stuffed in his hoodie pockets, bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet so everything's jiggling.

“Let's go in,” says Nick, who I can tell also sees how pissed Leo's getting.

Leo's fist finally relaxes. “Whatever,” he says, and we all go into the salon, Bobby too, still grinning, not caring that nobody wants him there.

Inside Maria's working on some old lady's nails. They're the only people in the place. I don't recognize the old woman. She kind of looks like my grandmother O'Donnell but not quite. Grandma let her hair go and didn't give a shit. This old lady's hair is some kind of fucked-up orange. Like anyone would think that's real. She's sitting straight up in a padded chair that looks like my dad's recliner and

she's got her hands stuck in something that looks like one of those rollaway TV stands. Everything else in the place looks beat to shit but this TV stand thing is bright and shiny. Maria's sitting in the chair by her.

"Hey," Leo says.

Maria looks up at Leo and he doesn't say anything else, just nods. Then she looks back at the old lady, who looks like a ghost next to Maria. Even with her hair tied back and in her Ocean City Nails blouse and slacks that make her look like she should be working in a hospital, Maria just drowns the old woman right out, her and the beat-to-shit recliner chair she's sitting in—the whole room, really, like Maria was some sort of special effect they spliced in over the boring real actors.

"Look at you, Madge," Maria says to the old woman. "Looking so beautiful. You're all ready to go out man hunting."

Madge snorts and I think for a second I see her drool but then I look closer and she's not. "I've had a man. One was enough. I don't need another one."

"Ow! Jesus Mary and Joseph!"

Somebody's yelling and me and Nick and Leo all look toward the back of the store where the tanning booth is. There's some kind of partition beside it, which is where the yelling came from. Even Bobby is distracted from a moment from staring at Maria.

"Waxing," Maria says without taking her eyes off of Madge's nails.

I immediately think of some woman lying back there with her legs spread and I know the others are thinking the same fucking thing, especially Bobby, but we don't say anything because Maria is right there and so is the old lady Madge.

"Waxing," Madge says. "Shaving. My mother always said these young girls should never start shaving."

"Oh come on, Madge," Maria says. "You want us to look all hairy and gross?"

"She said that if they just let it grow for a while when they first

start becoming young ladies and don't start shaving it'll just grow in like fine down and nobody will ever notice."

"Really," Maria says, like she was seriously considering this as some kind of option. "Did you do that?"

"Ah! Jesus Christ!" From the back.

"Oh, no," Madge says. "When do we ever listen to our mothers?" And she and Maria both laugh like it's the funniest goddamn thing in the world.

"Listen to you," Maria says.

"I guess it wasn't so bad," Madge says. "A little blood every now and then."

Maria laughs again, reaches over and flips a switch on the side of the thing that looks like a TV stand. "There! All dry now. You're all done." She stands up and pulls the thing away. Madge's nails are this bright candy red that practically glares. So now there's this blotch of bright red nails and this patch of faded orange hair and some dried-up pale old woman I don't know in between. Maria helps her out of the chair. Madge barely comes up to Maria's shoulder and looks like she's going to fall flat on her face but manages to shuffle over to the cash register behind Maria and pay for her nails. She shuffles on out the door and I realize she's even older than I thought she was. I wonder if someone is picking her up or if she's walking home, and why she's here at closing when I thought old ladies did this sort of shit during the day because they didn't have anything else to do.

When Madge finally leaves Maria says, "Give me a minute guys," and goes in the back. The yelling has stopped.

Bobby starts in like I knew he would. "God damn! That girl back there was getting her pussy waxed."

"How do you know it was her pussy," I say. "Maybe it was her legs."

"Fuck no," Bobby says. "It was her pussy. That little squeak right at the end when she was yelling? That's how they sound when you're doing something to their pussy."

"Oh, right," Nick says, "you're such a fucking expert."

“Fuck yeah,” Bobby says, looking back where the yelling came from. “Might have to get me some of that.”

“Right,” Nick says.

I look at Leo but he’s not listening. He’s too busy waiting for Maria.

When she comes out, she’s not in her Ocean City Nails uniform anymore. She’s got a short jean skirt and a white tank top and a leather jacket that stops before the top of her skirt, and she’s put on boots that make her taller than Leo. Her hair is down and sprawling all around her face and her lips are the same color as Madge’s nails were, and her own nails, which I hadn’t noticed one way or the other before, now look really long and black, black as her hair. I thought girls usually wanted their nails to be the same color as their lips but I guess not.

Leo’s not looking pissed anymore. He’s just got that kind of stoned look he gets whenever Maria’s around and dressed to go. Can’t say I blame him. Standing next to Maria he fades like shuffling old Madge, and it’s not just that Maria’s half Portuguese and half Italian, at least that’s what I think it is, while Leo’s pale Irish ass should be on a poster for the Celtic Festival, should be wearing a fucking kilt. I wonder sometimes what it’s like, being Leo with Maria.

“Let’s go,” she says.

Nick looks back at the partition and Maria says, “Oh, Tiffany? What a wimp.”

“She coming out?” Nick says.

“She went out the back,” Maria says. “She’s already gone. I’m outta here,” she calls to whoever’s still back there. “Lock up! See you tomorrow.” She takes Leo’s arm and we follow them out the front door.

Leo starts walking toward his car. “Let’s take Tommy’s car,” Maria says. “There’s more room. You don’t mind driving, do you, Tommy?”

“No problem,” I automatically say, although I’d really hoped

that Leo would drive so I could get fucked up if I wanted to. Time was I wouldn't have given a fuck but after last summer when my cousin Dennis got killed and they cut his body out from behind the wheel of his car and there was an empty fifth of Jameson's under the seat I've tried to have some fucking sense about shit like that. Dennis was a good guy. Leo looks pissed but doesn't say anything. We walk the block up to the Dunkin' Donuts where I'd parked. Nick starts for the rear passenger door and Maria says, "Wanna sit back with us, Bobby?"

"Fuck yeah," Bobby says, rocking up and down on the balls of his feet so everything's jiggling more than ever. Leo looks like she just asked him to go clean out the toilets at that pizza place her father used to own but he doesn't say anything, just gets in the back and slams the door. Maria gets in the middle and Bobby gets in beside her. Nick shrugs and takes shotgun. I get behind the wheel and we take off.

"Where to?" I say, trying to sound like some sort of limo driver, but I don't know how a limo driver sounds, so I guess I just sound like myself. I start to ask where they want to get some beer but then I think if I'm stuck being the designated driver then somebody else can worry about it.

Nobody says anything for a second, which makes sense. Nick's waiting to see what Leo wants, Leo's waiting to see what Maria wants, and Bobby's got to be so freaked sitting by Maria in back that he doesn't give a fuck what we do as long as we stay in the car as long as possible.

"Let's go down the shore," Maria says. "I want to see the ocean."

"It's dark, yo," Nick says. "What's there to see?" He laughs this little laugh that's more like a cough and before Leo can tell him to shut the fuck up Maria says, "I like it at night. It's beautiful at night. Let's just go down there and drive for a while." I could swear I hear Bobby breathe in sharp and then let it out like somebody punched him but I'm not sure. "Okay," I say. Service with a smile.

Maria makes it sound like it's some huge fucking expedition

but really it's only a couple blocks from where we are to Lynnshore Drive. Something Mr. Tomlinson said in social studies pops in my head. Urban density. He had some chart up on the screen comparing Boston with New York and Chicago and shit like that. I don't know why I remember, because Mr. Tomlinson is a fucking bore and his fucked-up Power Points don't even have any sound or animation or anything, but I remember that phrase, *urban density*, and I see as we drive how at night all the houses and stores and shit are just gray on black like that chalkboard Mr. Tomlinson never uses but never seems totally erased. It's so easy to forget with all this shit piled up on top of itself that there's a whole fucking ocean back there somewhere. We go past the coffee shop where my dad goes every Sunday morning to pick up the *Globe* and brings back giant coffees for him and Mom. There are two or three kids about our age hanging out in front and some older guy sitting in a chair by the entrance talking on a cell phone. We go past the Oceanside House Assisted Care Retirement Home, where some of the windows are lit but most of them aren't. I wonder if Madge lives there. I wonder if she's right now standing in front of her door having trouble finding her keys.

The street in front of Oceanside House ends on Lynnshore Drive. "Which way?" I say.

"Which way you guys want to go?" Maria says, which surprises me a bit, but there you are. Nick shrugs even though Maria probably can't see him do it. Leo says, "Take a right," and before Bobby can open his fat fuck mouth I turn right and we're driving along the shore just like Maria wanted.

All the big houses with their ocean views roll by on the right, and Lynn Beach is just a blot on the left. "Turn the music down," Maria says. We've been rocking Mastodon but I turn it down and put the window down too. It's chilly but not too cold. I take a deep breath and the air just smells like air. During the day this stretch of the shore smells like low tide even when it's high tide, but it's better sometimes at night.

With the window down things look clearer somehow and I can

see the waves rolling in. It's low tide and the beachfront looks the same color as the water, which is the same color as the sky. There's a three-quarter moon. There are darker blotches on the beach, rocks, washed-ashore kelp or some shit. They look like holes where there used to be something.

Nick is chill shotgun looking straight ahead. I look in the rear-view mirror. Leo has his arm around Maria but is staring out at the houses to his right. Maria is leaning into his shoulder, but she's got her ass pushing against Bobby's, and her left arm is—no. Fuck. I wait for the next streetlight and yeah, fuck me, she's got her hand on the top of Bobby's thigh. Her nails look like they're exploding every time we pass a streetlight. Bobby's moving a bit and singing along under his breath with the music but I can't see his left hand and I know, I just fucking know, he's got it in the hoodie pocket trying to position it so he can rub his dick without anyone noticing, or maybe he even sneaked it into his sweats for a clearer shot. Oh my fucking God. Maria's talking about how beautiful the ocean is, how she wishes it were summer so she could just dive in and swim swim swim. Bobby's mouth is hanging open even more than usual. He looks fucking hypnotized. I can swear there's movement on his left side underneath the hoodie. That stupid fat fuck. If we get out and there's a damp spot on the crotch of his sweats I swear to God I'm going to beat the motherfucker with a tire iron.

"You wanna keep driving?" I say, trying to calm down. "You wanna go on to Nahant?"

"I know what," Maria says, and then stops like she's waiting for someone to say, "What?" So I do. "What?" I say.

"Let's go up Lynn Woods."

"What the fuck is at Lynn Woods?" Nick says. "We won't be able to see two feet in front of us."

"It's great in there at night," Maria says. "It's like you're on another planet or something. Like a fairyland."

As hypnotized as Bobby is he still manages to snort when Maria says *fairy*.

"Can you even get in at night?" I ask.

"I know how," Maria says. "I know just what to do. Right, Leo?"

"Whatever," Leo says. He's back to staring out the window.

"C'mon, Bobby," Maria says. "Want to go to the woods?"

Bobby says, "Sure," just as we go under a streetlight and I look back and can swear I see Maria squeezing his thigh, clutch release clutch release, like she's working out with one of those hand grips trying to get strong. "Sure! Fuck yeah."

So when we get to the rotary I bear right and go downtown past the common. There's a few cars out but basically nobody's there. I don't think I've been to Lynn Woods since I was in junior high. I go down Walnut Street toward where I think the turnoff is for the main entrance but Maria says no, turn here, and we wind up on Lynnfield Street at a small dirt pulloff. There's a fence between the lot and the start of the woods with a gate like at a railroad crossing or a parking garage. It's down, so you can't drive past it, but there's nothing to keep anybody from getting out and walking. We park the car and everybody piles out. "Come on," Maria says. "I know exactly where to go."

Bobby runs ahead and makes a big show of charging up to the gate like he's going to jump it, once, twice. The third time he just ducks under it and stands on the other side and goes, "Ta-dah!" like he's some kind of fucking miracle. Nick does jump the gate but stumbles when he lands and almost goes flat on his face. Leo and I duck under and Leo hangs back to give a hand to Maria when she ducks under even though she doesn't need any help. When she's ducked down I pretend like I'm not looking at her tits, which even in the dark you can tell are about to fall out of her top.

"This way," Maria says, and as we follow her into the woods I realize that nobody ever said anything about stopping for beer.

Somebody gave a talk at school once about the history of the woods, comparing them to Central Park or some shit, but the fact is there's nothing park-like about them at all. There's paths and a reservoir, and I guess it's nice enough to walk around during the

day, but mostly it's just trees and bushes and more trees and bushes and an assload of rocks, some of them pretty fucking huge. Maybe it is historic. The guy at school told us that some pirate had some kind of underground bunker or some shit that was filled with treasure but it got covered up in an earthquake, and then a couple hundred years later some dumb fuck spent his life savings digging a tunnel trying to get to the treasure but he never found it.

I've heard Dad and Nick's Uncle Don and some of the other adults talk about what a hangout the woods were when they were in high school, booze and dope and sex for sure. I guess some of the kids still hang out there but I don't know why. Why go out in the fucking dark and dirt and get eaten by bugs or freeze your ass off when there's always a parking lot or somebody's house? I want to ask Maria this exact question but she and Leo have gotten ahead of the rest of us. There's just enough moonlight that I can see them, barely. Bobby's trotting along, huffing and puffing and jiggling, trying to catch up to them. Nick's just a little ahead of me with his hands in his pockets and his head down like he's watching each step he takes. So I jog up beside him and ask him.

"What the fuck?" I say. "Why are we marching through the fucking woods?"

"Cause Maria wants to. And what Maria wants, Maria gets, yo. Like that song in that movie."

"What movie?"

"The one with what's-her-name, you know, with all the old-time gangsters and shit, where she killed that guy?"

"Oh, yeah. I watched that on HBO. My dad thinks she's hot."

"You don't think she's hot?"

"I guess."

"You'd fuck her till your dick broke if you got the chance."

"Well, yeah."

Nick laughs, and then I remember. "Wait a minute. The song's not from that movie."

"It's not?"

“No. You’re thinking about the senior musical last year. The one about the Yankees and the deal with the devil or some shit.”

“Fuck the Yankees.”

“I know, but that’s what you’re thinking about. That’s where the song’s from.”

“Whatever. So what’s the song from the movie?”

“That’s the one where she kills the guy and says they all had it coming.”

“Whatever,” Nick says again, and then he points to where the others are up ahead of us. “Bobby’s struggling, man. Can’t keep up. Look at that.”

“Fuck him.”

“Probably the most exercise he’s had all year.”

“Maybe he’ll have a fucking heart attack and keel over.”

“Harsh, yo.”

“No more ‘gotta-get-me-some-of-that’ shit.”

“He’s harmless.”

“He annoys the fuck out of me.”

“Well, yeah.”

The wind’s picked up and the leaves in the trees are making about as much noise as the ones crunching under our feet. I zip up my jacket. The others have gotten into this clearing with a big flat rock in the middle. We get to the clearing and Maria and Leo are off to the left. It’s still wicked dark but with the trees set back from the clearing the moonlight comes through a little more. I can see Maria leaning back against a tree and Leo leaning in kissing her. Bobby’s standing beside the rock, which comes up almost to his fat gut. Maria’s jacket is on the ground at her feet. Her top is pushed up practically under her chin and her skirt’s up around her waist. I can see the curve of her tit rubbing against Leo’s jacket and the curve of her ass rubbing against the tree. Leo’s moving against her and she’s moaning.

“Fuck,” Nick says. “I gotta take a leak,” and he goes off into the woods like nothing’s going on.

I look over at Bobby against the rock and he's not even trying to hide it. He's got his hand down his sweats and the front of them is moving like there's an animal down there. He's saying something quiet, over and over again, but I can't make out what it is. I want to go over and slam his fat pig head against the rock. I want to go over and yell at Maria and Leo. *What the fuck is wrong with you? He's right there watching! I'm right here!* But I can't move. I just stand there watching them, just like that fat fuck, watching Leo grind into Maria and Maria wrap her arms around him and dig her nails into the back of his jacket, and I could swear they're cutting grooves in the leather, and before I know it my dick is hard and I try to pull my jacket down but it doesn't matter because nobody's looking at me.

I hear a crunch in the bushes and look over and Nick's standing there looking too, but he doesn't come back over. I can't see his hands and I wonder if he's jerking off too.

Suddenly Maria gives this gasp like she's about to sneeze and shudders all over. Then she pushes Leo away and pulls down her top and her skirt and walks over to Bobby like nothing's happened, like I'm not even there, and says, "Like what you see, Bobby?"

Bobby's just finishing wiping his hand on the side of his sweats, and then for once in his life he's perfectly still. "Like it?" Maria says again.

"Yeah." Bobby's voice is flat like he's pretending to be a robot.

"Me too. I like it a lot. And I like you too, Bobby. I really do."

"Fuck," Leo says from over by the tree.

"Shut up, Leo," Maria says, and then to Bobby, "No, really, I do. You're a stupid little fuck, even stupider than the rest of them, but you know exactly what you want. But you're so afraid of it, so fucking ignorant, and in a weird way, Bobby, that's kind of endearing. It really is."

It's so dark now I can barely see them, but just like back at Ocean City Nails, Maria's more visible than the others, more there.

"You know what you are, Bobby?"

Bobby doesn't say anything.

“Well, I do. Get up on the rock.”

Bobby doesn’t move.

“Leo, come over here and help Bobby up on the rock. You too, Tommy.”

In my head I say, *What the fuck is wrong with you?* In my head I say, *Fuck you freaks, I’m outta here.* But when Leo walks over and grabs Bobby by one arm, I walk over and grab him by the other, and I don’t know why, and we push him up against the rock and then pull him over on top of it. He’s heavy as fuck, like I knew he would be, and the fact that he’s not even trying to resist just makes him heavier. Why isn’t he putting up a fight? I look back and Nick is still standing off in the bushes. Maria doesn’t seem to notice him at all.

I’ve got Bobby by the ankles and Leo has his wrists, and Maria walks up, and I still want to scream at them and run away but at the same time I’m ready to stand there and hold Bobby down. Then Leo steps away and Maria says, “Get back, Tommy,” and I do, and Bobby just stays lying there spread out on top of the rock. He’s still saying something over and over I can’t understand.

“Bobby Bobby Bobby,” Maria says and shakes her head.

She walks up to the rock and stretches her arms out over Bobby, who’s not saying anything anymore. Leo comes over and pulls Bobby’s hoodie and t-shirt up and his belly looks swollen and pale and his tits look like a woman’s plopped above his belly. Leo steps back. Maria leans over Bobby and starts moving her hands up and down him, and he’s not moving, not jiggling any more, not making a sound. Then she holds her hand out and Leo steps back up. He reaches in his jacket and pulls something out and places it in Maria’s hand. She takes it and Leo steps back again. She flicks her wrist down and back up and all of a sudden there’s a knife blade hovering over Bobby’s fat gut. I yell something but it’s not words, it’s just a sound. I can make the sound but I can’t move. If she was holding the knife over me, I couldn’t move.

And then the blade goes down. She starts moving it across Bobby’s chest and belly, short strokes, up, down, sideways. Bobby’s

flesh quivers and I can see lines of blood starting to form, starting to drip down his side onto the rock, but he just lies there and doesn't make a sound. She makes a couple of final strokes under Bobby's left tit and then motions toward Leo with the knife. When he comes up and takes it, Maria leans over and whispers something to him. He shrugs. "You're no fun," she says out loud. Leo shrugs again and pulls a cloth out of his jacket pocket and wipes the blade. Then he does the same thing with his wrist that Maria did, only up first and then down, and the knife closes and he puts it inside his jacket. While he's doing all that Maria's gone back to work on Bobby, only now she's using her nails. She's put her fingers together like she's going to do a karate chop and it looks like she's tracing over all the marks she made with the knife. Bobby's moving around more and he's talking again but I still can't make out what he's saying. When she finishes she steps back and shakes out her hands. I can hear the click of her nails. I take a breath and realize I can't remember the last time I did.

Maria goes over to Leo and takes his arm like he's escorting her somewhere. She kisses him on the cheek and then looks over at me and smiles. "Tommy knows how to have fun. Don't you, Tommy?"

Bobby has slid off the rock and is lying in a heap on the ground, and now all of a sudden I can move again and I run over thinking he's dead. But he's not. He's breathing. He looks like he's asleep.

"He's fine," Maria says. "Help him up."

I reach down to try to get him up and I see his chest. There's a bunch of marks on it. It looks like writing in some sort of foreign language. I stand over Bobby and stare at the marks and try to make sense of them, and then I realize that the marks are letters, but they're backward. When Bobby stands in front of a mirror later, he'll see the words *fat fuck* carved into his chest.

I shake him like I'm trying to wake him up, and he coughs and sits up. Leo comes over and we help Bobby stand up. "You OK?" I ask and then immediately think, *He's not OK. I'm not OK. Nothing is OK.* But Bobby stands up and brushes the leaves and dirt off himself

from where he fell on the ground and pulls his t-shirt and hoodie back down. "OK," Bobby says. "OK."

"Yeah," I say. "Let's go."

I start to help Bobby to get walking, but Leo pulls me away and leans into me, holding onto my arm. With everything that's happened I don't know what he's going to do. I'm afraid he's going to bite my ear off, I'm afraid he's going to kiss me, but all he does is say, real soft, "You're not going to tell anybody, and you're not going to forget." Then he lets go.

Maria and Leo start walking back toward the car and Bobby walks right behind them, not exactly like nothing's happened, because he's walking very carefully and his body isn't jiggling and going all over the place like it usually does. But he doesn't act like he's hurt or anything either.

I look back at the bushes where Nick was standing but he's not there, and I don't see him while we're walking back to the car, and when we get to the car he's not there either. I unlock the car and Leo puts Bobby in the passenger seat and then gets in the back with Maria. I sink into the driver's seat and feel like I've just played full court all night. It's like I can barely lift the keys into the ignition. "Home, Jeeves," Maria says, and laughs.

All the way back Maria chatters to Leo about work and school and what they're going to do this weekend, like we just picked her up from Ocean City Nails. Leo says, "Yeah," and "Right," and "Sure," but mostly lets her do the talking. Bobby leans back like he's asleep. I take them back to the parking lot where everybody's cars are. Bobby gets out and doesn't say anything. He just starts walking toward his house three blocks away. Part of me thinks I ought to walk with him until he gets home but the rest of me is exhausted and just doesn't care, doesn't care if I never see him again, or Leo, or Nick, wherever he is.

Maria and Leo get out. Leo heads straight for their car but Maria comes up to my window and leans in, smiling. She says, "Thanks for the ride, Tommy. Let's do it again sometime." She reaches in and

touches my shoulder and I think my heart's going to stop all over again but nothing happens. Her nails are still wet. She didn't wipe them off.

I look at her hand with its wet nails on my shoulder, and then I look at her and try to think of something to say that will get her to tell me everything I need to know. But I can't. I just stare at her, and her smile fades and her face sags and for just a couple of seconds she's not drowning out everything else. She's just there. For the first time I can remember, she looks like she doesn't know what she's going to do next, and it seems like that makes her unbelievably angry. She starts to say something and stops. Then she gets her smile back and squeezes my shoulder twice, hard, before she takes her hand off and turns around and walks away.

When Bobby and Leo and Maria are all gone I drive back down to the shore, past the coffee shop where the kids are gone but the guy is still out front talking on his cell phone, and past the retirement home where all the lights are out. I park on Lynnsore Drive and get out and walk over to the sea wall and down the stairs to the beach. There's some guy out walking his dog right by the water. You're not supposed to walk your dog on the beach, they've got signs posted. The moon is gone. I look out at the sand and the water and the sky that are all one big dark blot, and then I turn around and look up at the houses that look out over the ocean, and I think about when my grandmother Bataglia was dying. She lay in the hospital bed with the tubes going in and out of her, and she was pretty much with it right to the end, but one day I was there when my folks were out of the room, and she just lay there with her eyes closed and the monitors hissing and clicking, on and off, and she said, "Something's wrong." Over and over again. "Something's wrong. Something's wrong."

