

Bodies, bodies. The beach was crowded, Marcella had not expected all these people everywhere—she had forgotten it was Saturday, forgotten, even, that it was June. Today, after Anthony’s phone call, she had come here gulping for broad sky, a long horizon, a vast and indifferent emptiness, but instead the beach was alive with babies crying and children running and their parents yelling or laughing or just watching, with that look of contentment she faintly remembered from a long time ago—

She veered toward the tide line, away from the massed umbrellas and beach blankets, going through a swath of tiny shells. They crunched beneath her feet, but she did not alter her path.

Anthony had said, “I’ve got some news.” His voice had been odd, solicitous and pained at the same time, and when he had said it, *news*, her throat had caught and she had thought again that she hated the phone. “Toni has gotten a job, he said. At the Cape. Where he and Toni were, and she was not. “A babysitting job.”

“Babysitting! Our Antonia?” She laughed with crazy relief, *See, you worry for nothing—*

And then he told her where.

“*What?*” she whispered, her laughter gone, gone. “Anthony. You can’t let her.”

“Chella, what the hell am I supposed to say?” There was a pause

and then he went on more quietly, grimly, “She found the job herself. She didn’t tell me ahead of time. We like shows of initiative.”

Marcella didn’t keep in touch with anyone from Cape Cod. It was Anthony’s place, it always had been, and when they divorced it had seemed natural to leave it too, entirely. She hadn’t even known Callie McClatchey, Cecil’s daughter, was married. Hadn’t known Callie had not one but two children—Cecil’s grandchildren, and Betsy’s too, whom they would never see.

Anthony said, “The McClatchey girl does need someone to help her, I suppose—”

“Stop it. *Please.*”

“I’m sorry,” he had said. “I’m sorry.” And she had known he was. He was not a consciously cruel man.

She walked on, mechanically, down the beach. The shells were still crumbling beneath her feet. Why was it satisfying to be destructive? She resisted the impulse to stop, squat down, examine the wreckage her bare feet had wrought, here on *her* beach, only a few hours from the Cape, in Connecticut. She had come to this little town blindly, after the divorce. It was near the boarding school where Anthony had sent Toni, and even though Marcella had known it would not make much difference, she could not bear to stay in Boston, so far away. Now Toni was in college but Marcella was still here, and she still could walk this beach and, most days, have no one recognize her. Even with all these people, she could be alone.

She had not asked Anthony when Toni’s job was starting. Already, even without details, her brain was barreling ahead, painting its pictures—it could be that right now Toni was holding the baby. A tiny girl, Anthony had said. Marcella remembered how an infant would turn its head toward a breast, even a stranger’s, mouth gaping like a fish, seeking even when there was nothing there to find. She wondered how Toni would deal with that, and felt a brief smile on her face like sun. Toni would just hand the baby over, as quickly as she

could. *Velocemente!* To Callie McClatchey. To Cecil's daughter. She looked like him—blond and blue-eyed, with an open, oval face. The brother was dark, favored Betsy. Marcella remembered him too, quite clearly. She couldn't think why. Did the baby perhaps take after him? Or in its tiny face, in the baby with whom she, Marcella, shared no blood, none at all, could one find Cecil again? Was Toni seeing him right now, not knowing what she was seeing? And the smile fell away.

She had left the public beach by now, and though there were still people it was quieter. She headed down to the water, and the coolness on her feet, the gentle splashing of her steps, calmed her in spite of herself. Perhaps she would swim later. An ordinary thought—and she felt a timid swirl of resentment, because she had been having more of these small pleasures lately, coming upon them like green atolls in the endless gray sea of days, and she wondered now if she had left them behind again. Only yesterday—yesterday—she had eaten some of the first sugar corn from the farm stand down the road, let the butter trickle down her chin. Then she had devoured a whole pint of local strawberries, and for the first time in a long while had felt the small thrill that comes from being alone, and doing what one pleases. She had felt carefree, or at least able to pretend—

Just then a small figure charged by, splashing her, and she exclaimed in surprise. It was a little boy, about three years old, his belly childishly round but his limbs just beginning to lengthen. Even as he flashed past she could see the sweet, faint outlines of muscle in his shoulders, his calves. But then he stopped short, and she turned to see an inflatable ball, colored like a globe, floating away past the wave line.

She had to clear her throat. She hadn't spoken since that morning, on the phone. "Is that your ball, sweetheart?" If he had been her own she would have said *caro*. Dear one. Something she had always thought she would say, to a little boy who was hers.

He didn't answer, just regarded her with a steady gaze that seemed older than the rest of him. "I'll get it for you," she said.

She waded out and retrieved it, turned back. Up on the beach, she saw a couple who must have been his parents—they smiled at her, waved, but did not come closer, and she could see that they were letting their son have a tiny slice of independence, letting him talk to the nice lady by himself. She thought of what they saw when they looked at her: a tallish slim woman (she heard her grandmother, her *nonna*, long ago: *molta mingherlina*—you are too thin, *Marcellina*). Dark hair twisted up on her head, not much gray, not yet. Alone—did they wonder why? The mother was holding a baby. She shifted it up higher on her hip as Marcella watched.

The boy had not moved. "Here is your ball, darling," she said, and held it out with both hands. Still he was motionless, and she walked slowly toward him, afraid he might dart away. She had not looked at a child this closely for so long! His eyes were solemn, dark brown. "Would you like to catch?" she said, and he gave a hint of a nod. She threw the ball, and in a sudden burst of movement he caught it, turned, and hurtled toward his parents. She waved to them and they waved back but the little boy did not look at her again, and then the young family continued down the beach.

She stood bereft in the water, and thought again of Anthony. He had never liked wistfulness, regret, longing for anything that had not come, that never would. If he could see her expression now, he would stop, one step too far away. His lean, handsome face would harden almost imperceptibly. There might also be a hint of old pain in his eyes, a look that would make her want to reach out to him—but she wouldn't. Because she was the one lacking, the one who had failed.

Their conversation had ended badly. She had wanted only to get off the phone. To be alone, to howl. Anthony, though, had wanted to chat; usually he was all business. Finally she said, "Anthony, please."

It had stopped him short. She did not say *caro*; why would she now? Still, today she felt that he noticed. She said, "I must go."

She knew he heard it, that he knew what she meant—*must*, right now, I cannot stay in control. "I'm sorry to have upset you," he said.

"It wasn't you," she managed to say. "I'm glad you told me."

"Otherwise it would have been a nasty shock," he said.

"Yes." Then she realized that he had said it as a test, that even now she was supposed to pretend otherwise. Even now, after seven years, Anthony could not have stood the mention of Cecil's name. "How hard this must be for you too," she said, and then was disgusted with herself. *Dio mio*, she thought, *still I say the wrong thing, always it is wrong—*

An old, familiar silence. Then a thought came to her, hitting her like a fist. "You won't tell her," Marcella had said.

"Of course not," Anthony had said, as though he had been waiting. "I will not tell her a single damn thing."