

Manuel and the Lobsterman

Manuel dropped four quarters in the slot of a rusty snack machine. Like everything else in Rockport, Maine, it was old, real old. He doubted anything would come out that hadn't been sitting in there for fifteen years. But he was hungry, so he pulled the knob. A bright yellow bag of potato chips dropped down.

Manuel grabbed the chips, walked to the middle of the dock, and slumped down against a wooden sign that read Rockport, Maine, Most Picturesque Harbor in New England. Big deal, Manuel thought. He took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of diesel fuel mixed with the salt air, and stared out at the harbor. A group of sailboats was anchored in the middle, and off in the distance was an island with a lighthouse.

He heard a squawk and noticed a seagull balancing on the edge of an old fishing boat. The boat looked even older than the vending machine. The paint was a faded gray, and the name *Dancing Mathilda* was just barely legible on the side. On the front was a wooden carving of a mermaid.

Manuel stared at the gull for a few seconds before he realized why it looked so weird—one of its legs was missing. “Hey, buddy, want a chip?” Manuel extended his arm toward the bird. The gull flew down to the dock and deftly snatched the chip.

An engine roared, and the gull took off. Manuel pulled his feet back just as a Harley Davidson Low Rider sped by. The bike pulled up in front of a sailboat, and a guy in a pink polo shirt and khaki pants got off. This was the weirdest-looking Harley guy Manuel had ever seen.

Manuel walked over and checked out the bike. “Nice ride,” he said.

The man took off his helmet. “What?”

“I said you got a nice bike. The timing’s off though. It’s misfiring every eighth cycle. You need to recalibrate the piston and adjust the timing belt.”

“Yeah right. I just bought it from the dealer two weeks ago. The timing’s fine.” The man slung his helmet over his shoulder and climbed onto the sailboat.

Manuel heard someone whistle and turned toward the *Dancing Mathilda*. An old man wearing black rubber boots and a torn, wool sweater threw a piece of fish to the one-legged seagull. “Dern summer people,” the old man muttered as he stepped onto the dock, glaring at the motorcycle.

The summer before, when Manuel had volunteered at the Dreamy Acres Nursing Home, he saw a lot of old people, but he never saw a man who looked that old who wasn’t in a wheelchair. This man had more wrinkles than Sheldon Sadinsky, and Sheldon was ninety-seven.

The old man bent over and picked up a large cooler. Was this guy crazy? Manuel thought. He should be playing bingo or something, not lifting heavy stuff. “Need some help with that?” Manuel asked, reaching for the crate.

The old man kept walking.

“Sir,” Manuel said, “would you like me to help you with that?”

The man paused. “Kid, you see a cast on my arm?”

“Cast? Uh . . . no, I don’t. I just—”

“Then why would I need your help?” The fisherman turned and carried the crate to a battered pickup truck.

Jeez, thought Manuel, what’s with this town? You try to help people, and they bite your head off. He started to walk away, then changed his mind. “Well, if you don’t, maybe you can help me. You know where I can get something to drink?”

The old man opened his truck door and glanced at Manuel. “This is Maine, kid. Last I heard they don’t serve minors here.”

“I don’t mean that kind of drink. I mean a soda. You know, Coke, 7-up, sarsaparilla, anything. I’m thirsty.”

The fisherman got in his truck but stuck his head out the window. “Corner shop. Up the hill, on the right.”

Manuel trudged up the hill. He passed Ella’s Antiques and the Rockport Rock Candy Store and at the top of the hill saw the Corner Coffee Shop. There were only two customers inside, and behind the counter was a tall man with a thin mustache.

“Can I have a Coke please?” Manuel asked.

“Nope.”

“Nope?”

“We don’t sell Coke.”

“Well, then could I have a Pepsi?”

“Don’t have Pepsi either.”

“Well, what do you have?”

“All we got left is root beer and ginger ale.”

“Fine. I’ll take a root beer.”

Manuel took his soda outside and leaned against an old wooden fence. He closed his eyes and cranked the volume on his iPod. This was it, he thought. He’d seen the entire town, and all it had was a candy store, an antique store, and a coffee shop. There was a film school across the street, but that’s all it was—a school. It wasn’t like they shot real movies there. It wasn’t like

Will Smith was in town or anything. Manuel took a sip of soda. How, he thought, how did he ever get talked into spending an entire summer in this loser town?

Manuel was thirteen years old, and other than Christmas vacations he spent with his father in Puerto Rico, he had always lived in New Haven, Connecticut. Manuel loved New Haven. He liked having three of the world's best pizza parlors within five blocks of his house and a twelve-theater Cineplex around the corner. He liked skateboarding around the New Haven Green and hanging out with his friends at the video arcade. Most of all, he liked working at Omar Sanchez's repair shop and helping Omar fix motorcycles.

Manuel had been in Rockport for less than a week, but he was pretty sure it had no video arcades. He was sure there were no movie theaters, and he was definitely sure there was no one he wanted to hang out with.

"Ouch!" Manuel yanked his foot away from the black rubber sandal that had stepped on his clean white basketball sneaker. He took off his headphones and looked up at three blond kids glaring at him.

"Are you deaf or something?" the tallest kid demanded. "I said, move your butt. You're sitting right in front of the bike rack."

Manuel turned around and looked at the fence. The paint was peeling, and a few of the slats were missing. "This is a bike rack?" he asked, standing up.

"For the last time—move," the tall kid said. He shoved Manuel aside and slid a shiny mountain bike into the rack.

Manuel regained his balance and stepped in front of the kid. "What is your problem?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing, except for you."

One of the other kids grabbed the tall kid's arm. "Come on, Justin. I'm hungry. Let's go."

As they entered the Corner Coffee Shop, Manuel read the backs of their T-shirts. Two of them were blue and said Camp Sail-Away Staff. The other one said Eat Fish. That's it, Manuel thought, I am so out of here.

He picked up a stone, threw it at Rockport's only stop sign, and thought, if only his mom had not let go of Sheldon Sadinsky's wheelchair. What kind of a nurse lets go of a wheelchair? If she hadn't let go, Sheldon wouldn't have crashed into Dr. Randolph, and if he hadn't crashed into him, the doctor wouldn't have asked Manuel's mom to go to the activity room for the wheelchair square dance, and if they had never danced, they wouldn't have fallen in love, and if they hadn't fallen in love, she wouldn't have married him, and if she hadn't married him, Manuel would not be stuck in this hick town that didn't even sell Coca-Cola.

Manuel stomped into the kitchen, spun a chair around, and sat in front of his mother. "Can we go now?"

"Go where?" she asked.

"Home—back to civilization. Away from nasty kids and Harley guys in pink polo shirts."

"Nasty kids? What nasty kids? Everyone I've met in Maine is so nice and friendly." Manuel's mother put down the magazine she had been reading. "Harley guys? Did some motorcycle gang ride through town? Did someone bother you?"

"No, Mama. There's no motorcycle gang."

“Well then, why would you want to leave this beautiful place?”

“There’s nothing to do here. The people are weird, and they don’t even sell pizza.”

“*Querido*,” his mother said, laying her hand on his arm, “I know it’s different than New Haven. I know you miss your friends, but please give it a chance. Once you start camp next week, once you learn to sail and ride those ski-jet things, you won’t miss New Haven at all. Besides,” she continued, picking up her magazine again, “we have to stay. I just signed up for a class at the film school.”

"You what? I thought you decided against that. I thought you said all the other students would be so much younger than you. Mama, you don't even know how to download pictures from your cell phone. How are you going to figure out a real film camera?"

"It's not a film class—it's a video class, and I met with the teacher today, and he's so nice. He said the students come from all over the world, and they aren't all young. Some are older than I am."

"But, Mama, you're a nurse, not Steven Spielberg."

"That's exactly why I want to take this course. I work with a lot of patients who have amazing stories to tell, and I want to videotape them. Besides, it will give me something to do while Garrison is writing his book."

“Yeah, well, what am I supposed to do—go fishing?”

“Camp starts in four days, and Garrison did say he’d take us to Camden tonight. We’ll go out to dinner, get ice cream. Garrison also thought you might want to walk the Brenners’ dog. The Brenners are so busy in the summer they don’t have much time for him. I don’t know if they’d pay you much, but Garrison knows how much you love dogs, so he suggested it.”

The next morning Manuel decided to try the dog-walking thing. They were only paying him a whopping two bucks a day, but the dog was a nice chocolate lab, and at least he didn't have blond hair and an attitude. "Come on, Angus," Manuel said as he unhooked the dog's collar. "The Brenners said you like to run. Let's see what you can do." They ran down Rockport's main road, and they didn't stop until they got to the harbor.

Manuel picked up a piece of driftwood and threw it in the water. Angus plunged in after it. Looking out at the water, Manuel noticed a small boat sailing toward the dock. His stomach tightened. It was the same three kids from the Corner Coffee Shop.

As the sailboat drew closer, Angus started barking and the tall kid started screaming. "Hey, you! Get your mangy dog out of here!"

Manuel picked up another piece of driftwood. This guy definitely had an attitude problem. As the sailboat pulled up to the dock, one of the other kids pointed at him. "Justin, look. It's that kid who stole your bike!"

"You're right. It *is* him." Justin turned to the other kid in the back of the boat. "Lucas, get the harbormaster."

Justin jumped onto the dock directly in front of Manuel. "Get it now or I'll have you arrested!"

"Get what now?" Manuel asked.

"The bike, idiot. The one you stole from the corner shop."

This kid is nuts, Manuel thought. He clutched the piece of wood tighter, wishing that Angus was a pit bull or at least a German shepherd. Manuel swallowed nervously but stood up straight. "You're crazy. I didn't take your stupid bike."

"Well, how come it was gone when I came out of the corner shop and you were the last one out there?" Justin turned toward the boat. "Lucas, hurry up and tell the harbormaster to call the cops."

Lucas got out of the boat. "You can't just arrest him. What proof do you have?"

"Proof? I've got plenty of proof. His kind of people are always stealing things. Remember that time in Portland when that gang of Mexicans took my camera?"

"He doesn't actually look like a dangerous gang member to me. Besides, I don't even think they stole—"

"Will you just get the harbormaster?"

Lucas headed down the dock, and Manuel sized up Justin and the other kid. They were both taller than Manuel, but they didn't look that strong. Still, Manuel hated being outnumbered.

"Where is it?" Justin demanded, stepping closer to Manuel.

Angus jumped between them and growled. Feeling braver, Manuel replied, "I told you. I didn't take the bike. Besides, why would I want some crappy Schwinn speedster when I have a 24-speed dual-suspension Fuji?"

"He's not here," Lucas shouted. "Door's locked."

Justin yanked the iPod from Manuel's belt clip. "Then I think I'll just *borrow* this until you give me back my bike. If you don't, I suggest you get out of town because I am going to have you arrested."

"Hey, give that back!" Manuel shouted as he lunged for the iPod.

"Matt, catch," Justin shouted as he threw the iPod to the other kid. Matt grabbed it, and he and Justin started running.

"Lucas," Justin shouted, "hurry up! We're out of here."

Lucas looked back at Manuel and then took off. The three boys ran through the parking lot, and Manuel raced after them. He was pissed. He had worked hard to get that iPod. His heart was pounding as he chased them around an old pickup truck. He had to get his iPod back. But just when he was within inches of grabbing Justin's shirt, Manuel tripped on a brick and fell, skinning his arm on the asphalt.

"Ay, *Dios mio*," he moaned, cradling his elbow. His arm throbbed and blood oozed out. Angus ran over, and Manuel pulled him close. "These people are crazy, Angus, but you know what? That's exactly what I'm going to do—some way, some how, I'm getting out of this town. Mama can stay, but I'm going back to New Haven."