

James Damis

Dupes And Liars And The Lost Shore Town

The nightmares began about three years ago, invariably involving predatory flocks of seagulls snatching me from sunbathing oblivion in their beaks and whisking me up and away from the beach over distant jetties where they drop me and devour my broken, bloody body over a long gala evening marked by speeches of distinguished gulls, big band gull orchestras, aviary dancing, and recognizing familiar humanized forms among the flock I have known throughout my life. The bad dreams seemed to be related to the dreary rut of existence I had been moving through, insouciant of the terrible snares and perils of insolvency, poor health, and loneliness I'd done nothing whatsoever to fend off. This is what the therapist I'd been seeing concluded, Dr. Casper Klibble, an oily gangling man with a penchant for solemn grunting at select intervals as I spoke. Through a multitude of sessions focusing on my boyhood vacations down the shore, Klibble hoped to uncover the watershed moment which turned me into the irresponsible, self-destructive, evasive individual I became. I repeatedly rejected his glib, simplistic theory that my early exposure to sea shore gulls produced a trigger incident which led to my adult shirking problems and, consequently, the unbearable nightmares. Now Klibble was an accomplished academic, no one could gainsay his many published monographs, especially his disturbing, if scholarly, volumes on the minds of farmers in Idaho who grow potatoes and live the ascetic life, except for the rum parties which begin with the harvest moon and do not let up altogether until the heavy snows of February. Many believe he fabricated the idea that these farmers are helpless around crates of rum and the sweat and discipline of the agricultural life interspersed by bacchanalian toping was Klibble's way of lampooning the campus worlds he loathes but could not leave. I number myself among these skeptics, not buying the cartoonish portraits of the

rumdum sodbusters, the only explanation being the insipid college send-up. Dr. Klibble savored his lauded stature in his cloistered domain, but he wanted more from life, honest physical work and true blue buddies and the ability to really laugh. He knew, however, none of those desires would ever enter his existence because of the irreducible flaws of his character. How do I know this, you ask? The man many times in our sessions delivered asides to his Portuguese man-of-wars as they pulsed in their custom tanks, wishing he were wired differently and could “be part of the vast swarm of humanity and find pleasure in the everyday world,” concluding he only wanted to “escape such crude realities.” Because of his publication prowess, I came to recognize, the man dealt with his patients with a perfunctory disdain, though my increasing rancor towards his inexorable, imbecilic assignment of blame for all my mental ills to seagulls from my youth only quickened his contempt for me.

On several occasions Klibble, exasperated with my loggerheads resistance to his gull twaddle, turned to his tank chockablock with the eerie man-of-wars and their jungle of accursed tentacles to declaim: “The poor sick one thinks he knows better than us, boys! The paradox of his suffering is his juggernaut of fear blights all reason.” Such venomous apostrophes were his preferred method of evincing his revulsion towards his patients, albeit in my case, as I am certain in others, the contumely and denigration was meted out carefully, so as to maintain a whiff of the therapeutic ploy in all the ridicule. I countenanced the barbs, the mocking gibes he shared with his Portuguese man-of-wars, the derisive guffaws he let out always after his remarks. I took the insults with great tolerance, hopeful Klibble had an ulterior plan hidden in his malevolence which would actually help me. Once I dared inquire about the tanks of the Portuguese man-of-wars so prominently displayed by his side as he treats his patients and he bristled and snickered as he murmured something in their direction before replying: “They are magnificent creatures, exquisitely grotesque, profoundly riveting in their floating portent.” “Is that salt water in those tanks?” I followed with, and he lit up at the opportunity to expatiate on the high the quality of the salt water tanks and his admiration and pride in the man-of-wars he’d raised there since their very early years. “They may please you, but I do not find them conducive to the therapeutic process. Their presence is repulsive and the way you talk to them and call them ‘boys’ is especially creepy,” I countered. “You are too ego-driven to see what you are doing,” Klibble said, “but it is very clear you are unconsciously transferring your fear of the

gulls as a boy to these poor harmless creatures of mine. You must disengage and begin anew. It is imperative you meet the threat of seagulls head on!" I took umbrage at his tone and pat presumption of cause in my terrible anxiety and nightmares. "Klibble, I want to get better. The nature of treatment I'm receiving from you is making me worse. What would you do if you were me? I'm at an utter loss." He rose and slowly paced to the window on the far wall, which he peered out and clasped his hands behind his back before returning to his imposing leather chair. He gazed at me for a good while and finally said: "You have no faith in me as a healer of the mind. You have no faith in yourself, nor in life itself. You are someone destined for failure in every undertaking you perform, whether it's a career in business or a visit to a deli, you invariably fall short. The latter may have the best mozzarella, but your weak efforts in bantering with the counter men are so awkward they grow uncomfortable and instantly tag you as a persona non grata. It's the layers of defeat I'm talking about." The vituperation of the man had once more rendered me speechless with indignation. "No one in your hapless condition wants to hear about seagulls, no one mired in such despair is willing at first to recognize the trauma certain large gulls were capable of causing in youngsters during the sixties on certain ocean beaches where they flourished. But, you must allow your brain to process the irrefutable evidence I am going to present to you which will prove that you were terrorized by these iniquitous, arrogant birds as a boy, resulting in your suffering today." I could not help myself from laughing at his last assertion. "You cannot be serious, Klibble. I am embarrassed for you, a reputable psychiatrist ascribing to such caca crapola." "Very predictable. Ridiculing what one fears," Klibble dismissed, reclined motionlessly in his soft leather chair. "You cannot prove my illness is directly related to a traumatizing incident with a seagull as a boy down the shore." He glared at me with an uncommon intensity. "Mr. Hargrove, I would be happy to show you the corroborating data. Please follow me." I was surprised and curious as he led me through a closet, or at least what always appeared as such before I knew it contained a sliding panel that opened to dark musty room with a few desks and a blackboard. He motioned for me to sit at a desk as he rolled down a projector screen and then readied an old-time projector for Super-8 home movies. When he hit the lights I found myself shocked and mesmerized by images before me—myself as a boy on the beach with my family, my mother and father ensconced on chaise lounges, my older sister arranging sea shells on the blanket, and me curious over a large gull glowering at me. Finally, I break the stalemate by sticking my tongue out at the gull, who hesitates before suddenly flying at me and snatching my

nose in its beak. Much blood spills from my nostrils as I scream. My parents are stirred and come to my aid, but the bird is gone already and it is obvious they do not believe my story. My sister is now laughing. The film goes dark and abstract with damaged frames until I am older, sitting on a jetty with a pipe in my mouth, a copy of Sartre's *On Being and Nothingness* in my hand, peering out over the ocean, when several large gulls fly towards me and land at my side. They eat the offering of bread I find in my pocket with ravenous hunger and immediately want more. When I shake my head and show them my empty palms that I'm all out of bread, they attack me with dive-bombing strikes at my head, opening several cuts and drawing blood. The film ended and the lights came back on and I was disturbed and staggered by what Casper Klibble made me watch, yet I was greatly suspicious. I had no memory of such violent episodes with gulls and never heard anyone in my family mention them. I may have smoked a pipe for a brief period in my twenties, but I only read one or two books by Sartre in college, certainly *not* the one in Klibble's movie. And while the movie had the worn quality and the natural authenticity of something shot in the sixties by a family, the whole business smacked spurious to me. Who, for example, was operating the camera? The people on the beach in those scenes were not me and my family, I concluded, but actors hired to portray us. When I stated as much to Klibble he bristled before howling with histrionic guffaws, obviously forced, and I knew I was right. "Unequivocally, Mr. Hargrove, the footage we have just watched of the gulls attacking you prove you were a victim of their mayhem. Now you must accept the diagnosis and strive to get better." I looked up at this dark enigma of an intellectual, somehow renown in psychiatric circles, professing his desire to cure me notwithstanding his conspicuous quackery. "You must have spent a good buck for those scenes on the beach, Klibble. The actors, extras, film crew, special effects with the gull. But I don't understand why. Didn't you think I'd see through this cockeyed maneuver? I am stupefied by your delusional hubris to even attempt it." He met my eyes briefly with cold pity before moving towards the opening and returning to his treatment room, where I followed and sat down again to face him. "Mr. Hargrove, it is my professional opinion that you are a very sick man whose mind is no condition to continue living without the supervision to ensure that you do not hurt anyone, including yourself. Because I do not wish to commit you at this time, I am offering you another option." He pulled a small pad from his coat and scribbled something on it and placed it on the coffee table. "Go see him immediately. Don't delay a second, Hargrove. Go now. He lives down the sea shore." With extended arm pointing to the door, chest and chin

thrust up, he said in an affected gravelly voice: “Go!” I read the words on the paper: Dr. Gunther P. Stolonice, Trauma Psychiatrist, Avian Specialist. There was an address in Neptune, NJ. “You are an insidious menace preying on desperate, troubled souls, Klibble. You are the one who needs help,” I said. “Nooo, you are the patient, Mr. Hargrove. You must accept that and the journey to graspable reality again. It will be hard, son, but you will be in good hands with Dr. Stolonice, who has studied the behavior of the shore gull for more than three decades. I have done all I could do for you.” I started away, turning to declare: “I loathe you, Klibble, and I will report you to an oversight board. You have done harm to my mind and for that you must pay.” Klibble jabbed his arm towards the door, pointing his finger, jutting his chin high, loudly ordering: “Go! You are now Stolonice’s problem, not mine! Go!” I met his foul gaze once more and tried to think of the appropriate oversight board, but nothing came to mind, and I left his vile lair forever.

I vowed to fight back and recapture the life I led before Dr. Klibble destroyed any chance of recovery from the nightmares and tortured anxiety, which had mercifully allowed interludes of small pleasures until he systematically eradicated them too from my capacity of experience, paved over by the black tar of despair. I returned to my position as an account executive for a wallpaper company catering to high end businesses with custom designs by acclaimed artisans. They had been kind enough to grant me a leave of absence to focus on my health issues and now I wanted to repay them with diligence and efficacy in drumming up clients for them. But I found it laborious and insurmountable to recapture my former stride of creative salesmanship and decided a day spent with one of the installation crews on a job site may inspire me with new ideas to close deals. I came prepared to pitch in and assist the workmen, clad in painter’s overalls and cap, and at first Carlos, Tito, and Hector were receptive and appreciative of the extra hand I offered, albeit who I was or my intentions I was unable to properly communicate. In a word, this language barrier proved an encumbrance to these skilled paperers’ usual workflow and, ultimately, it was my misconstruction of their Spanish as exhorting me to work harder when in fact it enjoined me to back off that led to a foofaraw and the four of us entangled in a skein of wallpaper like an eight-legged mummy, and in the protracted struggle to extricate ourselves, tumble down a flight of stairs, knocking over the very gastroenterologist who hired us to redecorate his walls. Despite this middle-aged, distinguished-with-a-full-beard physician sustaining multiple bone fractures and a concussion, he

offered no objection when his sole staffer present, a gigantic albino nurse who wailed in a piercing vibrato, spent all her energy trying to cut us free with a sharp shank of cold steel, completely ignoring him. The good doctor suffered in stoic silence while the frenzied big woman sawed through the layers of wallpaper and paste. In a disconcertedly idiosyncratic way, as I remained wrapped and motionless with injuries in a human enmeshment, I grew to find our odd rescuer quite lovely and fetching amid all the calamity, and till this day regret my only words of gratitude to her upon being freed: “You came to our aid, sweets, while the doc there had his bell rung pretty good. Your sense of triage is top drawer.” Shortly after uttering these regrettable words to this woman, a Slovak with poor English command it turned out, she began shrieking in her native tongue at the fallen doctor. “Help me, you bloated schmo! I am injured!” the doctor croaked in the fetal position. My three colleagues, bruised but uninjured, freed from mummification, came up behind her to express their gratitude for her good Samaritan work. But the sense of surprise in their approach frightened her and she whirled around with a hard right cross that caught Tito flush on the button, decking him. Naturally, a donnybrook of sorts broke out and the immense Albino had fast hands and some nimble footwork for a big woman, no match, nonetheless, for three men violently enraged by her capricious antics. They worked her over pretty good, a beat-down the big pale behemoth seemed to enjoy if you consider the crazy falsetto boffolas she could not hold back. During this time I dragged the poor doctor to a couch and left him supine with a blanket over his painful form. “I am going to sue you and your hooligans for attacking me,” he muttered with conviction. “Oh, is that so? Bring it on, Quackerino!” I rejoined with requisite spirit. “Say, would you know the way to the Turnpike from this dump?” I then asked, and got no reply before skedaddling, and as I did an epiphany hit me like a thunderbolt from an ineffable firmament: *I am not the person I want to be nor am I living the life I want to lead, but it is too confusing which comes first, the person or the life, as there are strong arguments for both, but I'm leaning towards beachcombing for the latter and moral relativist for the former.*

Of course, I quickly realized afterwards that I had these kinds of epiphanies of the impractical nearly every day for the last four years, sometimes twice a day. Yet there was something different about this one. You might say I had glimpsed a snippet of the future and the outlook was as bleak as bad clams over a bowl of Spaghettios. I knew the last remaining shred of my persona, the very nimbus of identity as a quasi artist whose work *should*

have been but was not the paper covering the walls of the multitudes, and the printed designs of others which were covering them, to which I devoted my entire professional life of 24 years, all was now tumbling down like a Superball bouncing into a sewer grate. Yes, I knew my goose was cooked, but never did I imagine the kind of betrayal dealt me by my three colleagues that ugly day. Carlos and Hector fingered me to the executive director as the instigator goading them through a series of extreme pranks, including hotfoots with a butane lighter, resulting in the welter of violence when they tried to defend themselves. Tito's lawyer served me a subpoena for manslaughter, harassment, and a hate crime, seeking damages totaling more than four million dollars. In a word, I was summarily cashiered and now bankruptcy and destitution were added to the snowballing juggernaut of distresses tormenting my sleepless nights. Shattered, ravaged by despair, I retreated from the world to my humble house and there holed up in a wound-licking trance of ruin.

I wallowed in other debacles of my own doing over the years, such as seventeen years earlier in that same cape cod, after a row with my young wife over the disagreeable, purportedly endearing moniker she'd lately given me, "Senor Dumkopf", I declared I was leaving her and, consequently, our tot August, and stormed out into the frigid evening in an undershirt and slippers to get loaded in a dive and crash in a motel on Route 46 in Moonachie, where, after three days in a soused haze of post-umbrage I came to my senses and drove back home. Only to discover Beatrice had split herself with August in tow. I searched for them to no avail for several days, desperate with anguish and remorse, but in the coming weeks I had to adjust to the new wretched, forsaken sensibility which would darken my thoughts evermore. Two years went by before I finally engaged a detective to find them and while I began to suspect the cologned stubby fellow given to Nehru jackets and pleather safari pants, a taciturn enigma called Chet Gorbler, took my upfront dough and disappeared, months later he showed up at my office half-bagged and laden with a cache of revealing photos. He dumped dozens of glossies on my desk and rewarded himself with a sip from his flask while I rifled through unequivocal evidence that Beatrice had been shacking up with some bodybuilder who apparently ran a pizza parlor upstate in the boondocks. "What about my son? Is August okay?!" His image did not appear in a single photograph, most showing the musclehead in honeyfoggling clinches with my wife in the gym or at the parlor, Beatrice looking rather buff with about twenty-five pounds of added musculature to her once frail frame. Gorbler hesitated to

answer me, swigging his flask again hard and tergiversating into a wry anecdote about his own son's misadventure delivering an obscene yard ornament to former congressman Richard Gephardt as part of someone else's prank. "Don't give me any of that Gephardt garbage, Gorbler! I want to know what the bastards have done with my boy!" I insisted. "Hey, hey, show some respect. Dick Gephardt is a personal friend of mine." I blew a gasket now and chided the dissolute gumshoe: "I don't care if he's your goddamn concubine, chief, lay the truth on me or I'll lay you out!" He swore and took a wild poke at me, a roundhouse that missed by a mile owing to his debauched wooziness and left him stumbling, off-balance, when I clipped him on the very top of his head with the metal base of my desk lamp. So now I had an unconscious man strewn on the floor of my office and at first I was gravely concerned on several obvious levels, but after a hearty lunch in the nouvelle cuisine joint in the neighborhood I just threw some ice water on Gorbler, finally rousing him from his snooze and we mutually picked up as if none of the Gephardt quarrel ever happened. And while it took months to fully eradicate the stench of the man's cologne from my office, I would unhesitatingly tell anyone who cared that Chet Gorbler is good people, despite his bearing the bad news that "Augie," as they now called my son—a shortened appellation Beatrice and I vowed never to utter-- was completely brainwashed by the musclehead pizza lout named Sal Mugavero, and was already pumping iron and greeting the public in the parlor and, worst of all, calling the vulgar *caffon* "Daddy."

All of this unbearable heartbreak took place in the far-flung netherworld of upstate New York in a godforsaken burg called Herkimer, and I jumped in my Jetta and zoomed up the Thruway to win back my family. Sal's Pizza was located on narrow curving lane near the center of downtown Herkimer, the neon sign the strangest I've ever come across, depicting an Adonis of a plate-spinner a la The Ed Sullivan Show, only the plates here were brilliantly red and white pizza pies, a good dozen, and the Adonis grinned confidently in an action pose that oscillated at night. A signed 8x10 photo of Ed Sullivan and Bill Dana (Jose Jimenez) laughing and pointing at one another hung in the window. "To my pal, Claudio. The farmer I met on a walk upstate," Sullivan wrote to Sal's father. I entered the premises and stood at the counter, searching faces of the pizza men for Mugavero to no avail. There was no sign of Beatrice or August either. I ordered two slices and sat in a far booth to scarf them down, vouchsafing the joint made a damn good pie, expecting everyone who came through

the door to be my ex-wife, son, and the son of a bitch who took them from me. They never came and I sat there all day, gorging on a truly epicurean pizza, watching the door as strangers kept showing up, Herkimerites hungry for a fine pie. After around my seventh slice I lumbered towards the counter and asked to see Sal Mugavero. "I'm from Publishers Weekly and he's won the sweepstakes," I proclaimed. The three swarthy pizza men looked at one another and remained silent and, as I tried to explain the good news I brought Sal, I could not discern if they couldn't understand me or were just very apprehensive. Then, just when the tense stillness seemed ominous, the mustachioed slim one leapt over the counter and stormed past me towards the door, pausing only to jerk his head querulously for me to follow, and he led me to a delivery car covered in a custom paint job of pizzas plate-spinning. His name was Nunzio and he drove recklessly fast and spoke in a clipped broken English that carried the whiff of continental pedantry, ancient Rome a source of several incomprehensible allusions. "When you were studying Italian history," I asked him, "did you ever think you'd be one day living so close to the other Rome here upstate in New York?" He stroked his mustache and looked at me in utter bewilderment. "Roma," I stated, "here!" I gesticulated in a somewhat frenetic manner to indicate the concept of here in northern New York. Nunzio now swept the back of his hand upward against the front of his neck, a vile insult of a gesture. "Now why would you do that when you don't even know me? Is it simply an involuntary reflex skewed to belligerence? I'm actually curious," I asked in a calm, even tone. This time he violently pounded his left palm into his extended upper right arm, directing towards me the old Italian salute, the ultimate sign of profane disrespect. "Real nice," I sighed, "you know, it's folks like you, Nunzio, who've debased the meaning of common civility in our culture." He spat and chuckled and gave me the finger, and I don't know exactly why, but I placed my thumb against my nose and wiggled my fingers at him, a sign I recalled my mother often did towards my father at the supper table when he wasn't looking.

After this, we sort of knew where we stood with one another and drove in silence except for a brief discussion on the economic blight apparent in the greater Herkimer area. The downturn hit the poor bastards pretty hard. He turned into a dirt pathway that pushed through woodland and a stretch of deserted factories and finally came to ranch house really off the beaten track near a series of black smokestacks in desuetude. Pulling up to the place in a cloud of dirt, he jerked his head for me to get out. "How the hell am I going to get back to my

car?” I asked. “Not my problem, chooch,” he snapped, and the moment I closed the door he patched out, leaving me in the lost hellhole alone as I gazed at the eyesore of a structure that Beatrice and August called home. The peach shingles had mostly faded into a grimy puke shade and the treeless yard was all rock and mud and fossilized animal turds. I stood out there several minutes pondering the wisdom of proceeding any further, questioning whether such a quest was too late, suspecting the wife and son inside whom I came for were nothing but transmogrified strangers now who’d send me away like an annoying Jehovah witness proselytizer. I almost indeed walked away into the redneck gathering dusk, and very quickly I wished I had before the little fellow on the chrome dirt motor-trike came roaring from the backyard, spraying mud everywhere in circling me. There was menace in this rider, a man-boy of some freakish sort with a bodybuilder buff body and a fat smirking mug and greasy pompadour. I feared this roid raging youngster for a number of reasons, but mainly because I knew, knew, knew the unutterable, ineluctable truth on some raw subconscious level. I wanted to run and dose myself into a coma but his unforgiving glare with those gimlet eyes buried in the deep fleshy face held my eyes tight. “Senor Dumkopf, I presume?” he taunted, breaking the ugly stillness after stopping a few feet in front of me. “August, is that you, son? Oh, my good Lord in the heavens! What have they done to you?!” The boy, indeed my beloved son, unleashed a dismissive cackle. “Name’s Augie, Dumkopf, and let’s not forget one simple fact—you bailed on Ma and me.” He rode even closer to me. “You got some nerve showing your face around here after all this time.” Actually, it was only a few years and August was still only seven years old, but the roids and the muscle mass packed onto his little frame made him appear and sound like some rough hombre of a dwarf. “August, I am so sorry to see you like this. Where is your mother?” He came riding at me and popped a wheelie so mud sprayed me, remaining still then as he met my eyes. “You left her cause she called you Senor Dumkopf,” he reminded with a snicker. “It’s much more complicated than that, son. Some day when you are older I’ll explain it to you.” The boy leaned on his handlebars and glowered at me for an uncomfortable silent stretch. “I came back after only a few days, August. I missed you terribly and decided your mother and I could work out our differences.” He grimaced and gunned his trike right at me and I dove out of the way, into the muck, just in time. “You lie, Dumkopf!” he snarled. “You never looked back.” I was pulling my mired form up when I countered: “No, what I’m telling you is true, August. I went back to an empty house. Your mother had been having an affair with the muscle-moron you know as Sal Mugavero and she packed you up

and sped away, unconscionably, to spend her life with this s.o.b.” The boy dismounted in a huff and jabbed his forefinger my way as he shouted: “How dare you insult the integrity of my father! You’ll pay for that! I’ve been waiting my whole life to kick your sorry ass.” With that the front door opened and out came two oiled gleaming freakazoid physiques, one the wide squat mass of blown-up sinew with a tiny head and shellacked back hair, Sal, the other a painful shock to behold, like a kick in the gut leaving one gasping, the female form bulked and ripped beyond all sense of reason and seemliness, a woman of such monstrous musculature one can only conjecture the depraved motives inherent in such a transmogrification...and this was my ex-wife Beatrice, once beautiful, fine, delicate, now an enormous unwieldy strange bodybuilder. “Beatrice,” I called incredulously. “Is that really you? I have been tortured with regret since losing you and August, but now my misery increases exponentially seeing what this juicehead Svengali has done to you. He seized upon your vulnerability and mutated you into a creature after his own likeness. I will notify the authorities of this criminal subversion.” She roared with derisive laughter and mocked my concern by striking dramatic bodybuilder poses, moaning with satisfaction as she flexed with bug-eyed fervor, and Sal too chuckled and clapped, flexing some himself. “What’s the matter, Senor Dumkopf no likey lady with the muscles?!” Beatrice gibed. “Senor Dumkopf does not approve?” The boy was tearing up the yard with his rumbling trike, ripping crazy eight formations that missed me by less and less each time. “You probably think I’m going to kick your ass, Hargrove,” Sal declared with a smirk. “Augie” made me dive in the mud just then as he tooted by and I slowly rose and looked Mugavero in the eye and said: “You’re a *caffon*, Sal. That’s a crude imbecile in Italiano. I feel the anguish of an insensate universe when I look at the primitive way you choose to live, the willful wallowing in your own ignorance.” “Ooh, I’m supposed to be impressed by your high-hat jeering. Well, I’m here to tell you, Hargrove, to shove all that phony twaddle up your ass, and secondly, (he grinned at Beatrice and she cackled jubilantly), no, I ain’t going to do the honor of busting you up, Hargrove, because there happens to be someone else in this family who’s been even more eager to do so.”

They watched now August on his motor-trike far off near some chickens and the bodybuilders smiled with their chins high as he negotiated a wide muddy turn and came back towards me, the raw hog sound burgeoning into a sheer threat of demolition. The swollen homunculus which my son had become was screaming a shrill

war cry as he barreled a muck-splashing path my way, no doubt intent on my murder. And I stood there and waited for it to end, knowing full well a man, a father, doesn't make it back from something like this regardless of the outcome. August surprised me, however, and pulled up to a mudstorm of a stop, dismounted and began circling me. "You remember what he did to us, Augie," Beatrice cheered, "and how much you want this, son." The boy looked like a beach ball with his round girth stuffed into a skintight sort of racing suit, and he began slogging through the muck towards me, crying: "Don't you worry none, Mama. I'm gonna beat the bastard up real good." Here was my own son coming to hurt me and at that moment I realized there was no more love in me for him. Sorrow oozed up in my chest and I put my face in my palm, unprepared for the starkness of the attack bearing down on me. "Teach the prick a lesson, son," Mugavero yelled, "make an example of him for other deserter dads to fear!" August suddenly bolted for me with an unintelligible Geronimo type scream and I sidestepped him at the last second and he tumbled in the mud. Furious, he quickly got himself up and charged at me once more, only I darted away just as his stubby arms were reaching me. After several more failed attempts to fight me ending in muddy flops, the boy called to Mugavero: "Papa, the son'bitch won't put 'em up. He's a yellowbelly bastard!" "Beat the hell out of 'em all the more when you get 'em, Augie!" Mugavero bellowed. "Bring the pain, darling!" Beatrice chimed in. He looked like he may blubber so distraught he was at my nimble evasions, and to my own surprise I felt sorry for him, a genetic simpatico perhaps with his supreme frustration. In retrospect, I must have briefly lost the ability to recognize all reality, for here was this roid raging dwarf trying to kill me and yet the mysterious bonds of progeny lured me into standing firm, letting him catch me. Maybe it was guilt and I felt I deserved to be punished. Whatever it was, as soon as he started pounding me I switched into a boxing mode and my dancing footwork kept the ponderous aggressor at bay. Through a dark, grotesque prism I was Ali to my son's Frazier, and I kept up lithe and shifting movement while he inexorably plodded forward, occasionally throwing a wild haymaker easily eluded. "Beat the pussy's goddamn brains in, Augie!" Mugavero exhorted from the beach chair he now sat in. Beatrice too sat in one, shrieking: "Bust him up, Augie! Break his will and lay the fraud out, babycakes!" But he couldn't lay a fist on me as I bobbed and weaved around his ungainly charges, now talking to him throughout, not trash as was Ali's wont, but increasingly conciliatory until I finally asked the boy for forgiveness and a new beginning in our relationship, and while he kept coming at me his intensity seemed to slightly wane. "Let's wean you from the

steroids and build a new life for you and allow your body to rejuvenate and return to your normal healthy weight,” I pleaded. And he suddenly ceased chasing me and stood with his head down. Sal and Beatrice hollered for him to press the fight, but he just gazed at me and called in a low demonstrative voice: “I am ready to hear you out, Hargrove, but I need a hug first.” He opened his arms waiting for me, and while I hesitated, I nonetheless bent over to wrap my arms around his solid, distended form and squeezed. In a flash I realized it was a feint as he pushed away and let fly combinations pummeling my head and nearly knocking me senseless until I gathered myself enough to land a few good blows of my own. The kid hit so hard it felt like he could take me out with any punch, but his size made it difficult for him to reach my head. He was working over my breadbasket and below when suddenly he lunged at my thigh and sunk his teeth into my skin, drawing blood. I screamed...he had me down in no time and began raining blows all over me, particularly my head. Sal and Beatrice were going crazy cheering and the rabid pitbull boy would maul me to death if I didn’t somehow gather mud in my hands and whip it in his face, and as he squealed and squawked clutching his eyes, I got up off the mud deck to make a run for it. In my beaten-up condition I knew they would catch me, if not the mad boy, who I had the jump on, certainly the bodybuilder freaks who were shouting choice imprecations as they made an unsteady, slippery beeline for me. So when I scrambled past August’s motor-trike I hopped onto the banana seat and, as unwieldy as it was for my oversize frame, I was capable of driving it. I heard August’s furious shouts shift into wails and Sal and Beatrice now changed course for the pick-up in the dirt and rock driveway. The trike had some real speed to it, especially when I tore into woods and farmland to lose my hell-bent for blood pursuers, and that pick-up followed me off-road for the longest time too until I hid in an abandoned silo for the night from which I’d see their headlights moving through the acreage for hours, still searching.

I made it home the next day and began the hard process of moving on with my life, realizing my family was gone for good, when in the wee hours one rainy evening as I lay in bed police detectives came knocking on my door to arrest me for the theft of my son’s recreational vehicle. They found the trike where I’d ditched it in the woods early that morning on my way to retrieving my car at the pizza parlor, where I was surprised to find the old Jetta unscathed in the spot I’d left it. I wanted to fight the charges and show that fleeing on the trike was all I could do to save my life. I wanted to clear my name in court, especially since the Buffalo newspapers had

picked up on the story and were having a field day pillorying me as a kleptomaniac who steals from his own son. But my lawyer advised me instead to cop the plea and avoid a trial, as no jury would exonerate such a father, already roundly censured for robbing his troubled, estranged little boy. I accepted five-hundred hours of community service in the Herkimer area, where I randomly serviced shut-ins with lunches of fluffernutters or beeferoni deluxes, my two specialties, and regaled them with country songs I improvised on the kazoo.

While the demise of my marriage was a grisly debacle, both humbling and debilitating, I slowly struggled back and found strength deep within to forge ahead with a new purpose and vision, albeit a weathered knocked-around sort of view, but also one wiser and laced with a certain bittersweet melancholy. I knew now there was no other path to follow but that of an artist, I had so much inside me smoldering and seething that just had to come out and I had no choice but to let it spew forth into a spate of symbolic expression. Our modest cape cod house that I continued to live in now became my art studio and most rooms were jam-packed with brushes, containers of paint, and a multitude of canvasses I'd been working on or were finished and displayed all over. The ideas and images sprung forth in great bursts of divine afflatus directly from my subconscious, and I readily went with the magnificent surge of this force, painting in a kind of fevered dream. I don't know why, but I wanted to do an action portrait of Chet Gorbler, the detective, and for a reasonable sum he agreed to sit on a stool in my house for several hours as I worked. At day's end, three paintings were begun: Gorbler smoking a long tiparillo in a milk man uniform saluting at attention beside his milk truck, a barefoot Gorbler grinning holding a bunch of lemons while a shoemaker repairs his wingtips in his repair shop, and Gorbler in free fall from a skyscraper with a crowd in viewing stands applauding, among the observers former presidents Taft, McKinley, and Garfield, as well as Glenn Ford, Raymond Massey, Ray Bolger, and Irene Ryan. I was very pleased with these early efforts in portraiture, even if I had to bring in the fumigator again to remove the residual stench of the detective's cologne. I proceeded to withdraw from the merciless chaos of life outside my studio and immersed myself completely in the new frontiers of representational painting my brush incessantly sought out. It was a pared down existence, Spartan, ascetic, terrifying, exultant, but I knew it was right and essential to my survival, that I created lasting works which spoke of my pain and despair and the human condition that eventuated the damaged likes of me. I painted ants devouring ginger snap crumbs on an

iridescent toy boat floating in milk. I painted Shemp Howard with a lit light bulb in his mouth riding a wild boar in Chinatown. I painted countless random civilians I came across during my brief forays to the supermarket, sneaking snapshots and improvising their portraits to include impressions of their connection to the controlling monolithic world order, many depicted in resplendent military uniforms wearing Prussian helmets and brandishing batons. What was I trying to say or accomplish with such obsessive devotion to a far-flung vision of arcane mysteries? It is a question no one can truly answer, especially myself, the artist, except to say the spontaneity of the journey was irresistible, compelling.

And then...the money began to become a concern, an increasing worry that stole away sleep and foresaw utter financial ruin unless new income soon manifested. I missed mortgage payments and fell into debt and suddenly the truly stultifying imperative an artist most dreads, the one that erodes inspiration and quells the Muse, boomed and crashed in my head: *you must get a job*. I convinced myself I could find something art-related and relentlessly pounded the pavement to that end. Months passed, however, and now I sought any gainful employment which would keep the debtors at bay and forestall the banks from foreclosing on my house, which seemed a foregone conclusion the Friday evening I drank myself into a stupor after suspecting I blew another interview that day, this one for a position as a floor waxer's assistant, by trying to work in some lines from The Beatles' "Taxman" with a creative twist: *I am the waxman, and I'm coming for you*. I previewed this attempt at levity for the morning boys in Flynn's who gather for eye-openers, as lately had been my custom, and they howled with laughter, especially when I sang with a mock gusto. But the allusion was all wrong in retrospect for the point I was making about ventilation and safety around wax fumes and that evening, back in Flynn's, I knew it and got a mammoth bag on and felt all of the futility in stumbling home, only to find a call back on my answering machine awaited me, not the floor waxer gig, but from the wall paper company that interviewed me months earlier. I soon learned that they had filled the position I had sought, wallpaper designer, but wanted to know if I'd be interested in another opening, account executive in sales. Desperation obliged my acceptance, kidding myself that I would slide into the creative end of wallpaper first chance I got. But they stifled me in this aim, never really considering the design portfolio I unceasingly updated and submitted to Art Department gatekeepers. Some of my designs were quite eye-catching, though hardly suited for the mainstream home

decorator. The glow-in-the-dark electric eels swimming in an indigo ocean with skeletons snorkeling and old-time sandhogs in caissons was one avant-garde wallpaper I presented to them to no avail. The red and yellow zigzagging stripes punctuated by little snake charmers, gold-rush prospectors, and panicky skydivers without opening parachutes I thought had potential. Then I came up with the forty-four presidents all sitting on top of a double-decker bus, laughing and chatting one another up, repeatedly duplicated all over a dun and puce colored backdrop. The gatekeepers politely accepted these portfolio submissions, only to quickly return them with a fake smile which exuded *please leave us alone*. But I wanted to maintain my identity as an artist and the sample work I showed these people was all I had left to do--so I kept trying, both to my chagrin and self-satisfaction, for years to come.

While theoretically there was always that ghost of a chance one of the art folks would take a shine to one of my designs and sign off on it becoming an actual wallpaper print, somewhere in my quiescent mind I understood this to be but a pipe dream. Nonetheless, I was making a reasonable salary in accounts and being around the print designers once in a while engendered the illusion I was one of them in a way. But the oppressive weight of unabated rejection takes its toll and after five or six years I quit painting altogether and focused on aiding young new wallpaper artists in honing their aesthetic vision. I developed an uncanny knack for identifying artists who were ready to sell out and devote their talents to our wallpaper, and I'd ride roughshod over their capacity to produce designs for prints on strict deadlines. But as I drove their output tirelessly and occasionally admired their work, I could concomitantly sense much of my very being drifting into lassitude and indifference. Alienation began to trouble me, I wasn't eating right or much at all, and the paralyzing torpor that plagued me at work gave rise to a new burning fear of being fired and plummeting into destitution once more. This is where the nightmares began to haunt me with sinister images of unspeakable creatures coming for me, attacking, descending upon me, and over time distilling and crystallizing into but one fierce flying foe: seagulls. The nightmares increased in frequency and menace and these birds of terror were ever skulking in the dark recesses of unconscious, waiting for me to fall asleep, though more often than not dread and fear led to insomnia. Often I would leave the house in the early morning hours and walk the streets haphazardly until the break of daylight, and then hie my meager languid ailing form somehow straight to work. The wallpaper senior

staff began to notice my appearance, gaunt, sunken red dazed eyes, sullen detachment, coupled with multiplying episodes of inexplicable, perverse behavior, such as badgering a staid insurance company to decorate their walls with paper depicting a series of random freakish individuals grouped into cryptic teams sporting foreboding uniforms and separated by rivers and black soil spotted with day-glo flecks of orange. I made such a uniform for myself and I wore it on one of my nocturnal rambles and then to work. The ensemble struck some as a baker's outfit, though in black with lapis lazuli piping and several Byzantine coat of arms heralding the pageantry of the modern day Mummers and Shriners, with the hat at least three times puffier and higher than the traditional baker's hat. It stood approximately three-feet and seven inches from the top of my head with an eleven-inch diameter at the base of the crown, creating a loose, oversize fit that allowed the brim to drop, for the most part, below the forehead and over my eyes. This was not the effect I sought but took to it immediately, relishing the sense of concealment it offered while coping with walking into objects because of the obstructed vision. At work that morning naturally they called me in and sat me down, and it so happened I missed the chair and did a pratfall. No one laughed except I sort of giggled as I scrambled up, and I felt their irritation now as they insisted I remove my hat. I refused outright. "Hargrove, I'm trying very hard to be patient and tolerant with you," Rance Wilkinson, the Senior VP of Production, asserted. "I understand you are having some personal travails...but we need you to take off the damn hat before we talk to you. Okay?!" I did not appreciate this martinet's tone, patronizing, dismissive, so I responded: "Let me hit you with a hypothetical. Suppose I demurred at your request? Would we sit here in your office at loggerheads like this the rest of the day? I think I would like that sort of esprit de corps. We need more of that around here, no?" Then, in a flash, my hat was swept from my head and I was gazing at the three executives of the company, one of them, the rotund, jowly, lugubrious Cleo Murtaugh, was holding my hat. "You swiped my hat," I accused him. He nodded and said, "I took it for your own good, Hargrove. You're not thinking right and we would like for you to talk to someone. You must get some help, Hargrove." I sprung at him, lunging for the hat, but he was quick enough to pass it to Wilkinson, who retreated with it as I charged him, dishing it off to Ty Schmarz, the buttoned-down controller who never before seemed capable of laughter but now yelled *Salugi*, the proper childhood term for the game, and began guffawing as he receded from my advance. This went on for a good long time in there until we wore ourselves out and had to take a breather and now Wilkinson put his hand

on my shoulder and said solemnly: “Hargrove, you’ve always been a solid wallpaper guy for us, and we want that to continue.” He looked me up and down with a frown and a circling, disparaging hand. “But all this rigamarole...has got to stop. Go talk to someone, get yourself straightened out.” I nodded with my head down and knew the man was right.

It was decided I would seek out the counsel of some master headshrinker who would navigate my troubled mind through the crisis befallen me as a wallpaper professional, the last bastion of my life left seemingly unscathed and part and parcel to my sense of well-being and worth. Gradually, imperceptibly, the realization through the march of time that my ideas and designs for prints would never cover walls anywhere undermined my ambition and vitiated my vision. Despair and dejection will outlast the valiant struggles of most darkened minds unless they find the right allies for support in the psychiatric profession. Dr. Klibble was recommended to me by an elderly gas station attendant at the Sunoco on Route 43, a most amiable fellow who spoke eloquently of his stressful years on Wall Street and his erratic behavior (St. Vitas Dance, flagpole sitting) and eventual breakdown he suffered. “There is a way back,” he assured, citing the years of hard work he did with the “marvelous, intuitive” psychotherapist who turned out to be Klibble. As I pulled away I caught him doing a spastic sort of rumba with his eyes closed and a blissful expression on his face, his one palm on his belly, his other hand thrusting the windshield squeegee into the air like a swashbuckler, a sudden disturbing image. In retrospect I construe this vignette as a harbinger of the quackery I would slowly identify being dispensed by the pitiable attendant’s false savior, one Casper Klibble. I was placed on an indefinite leave of absence to focus exclusively on my deteriorating mental health and found myself under the aberrant care of man bent on proving his procrustean capricious diagnoses, a dogmatic zealot who went to demented extremes such as producing fake home movies from the sixties, purportedly those of my own family, to buttress his feckless, inane theory that several traumatic brushes as a boy with bellicose seagulls sent me down the path of anxiety, fear, and despair later in life. Depraved violent nightmares continued to torment the modicum of sleep I was able to procure, invariably involving predatory gulls spiriting me away to their turf to mete out their unspeakable torture. Klibble could not comprehend the notion of symbolism or allegory in dream analysis, but honed in only on the gulls as literal attackers I have suppressed from consciousness for my entire adult life. When I questioned this

premise, or even so much as quibbled with Klibble, if you will, the esteemed academician and psychiatric luminary resorted to mocking, jeering asides at my expense to his flanking court of adjutants pulsating and throbbing in their custom tanks, the phalanxes of Portuguese man of wars. Here was the real Klibble, cracking wise to his intimidating acolytes with virulent derision and the ever adumbrated threat of tentacled throttling, a cold malevolent ploy aimed to shut you down with shame. By the time I finally broke with Klibble and terminated my treatment altogether with the insidious quack, I was in much worse shape than when I started seeing him. As aforementioned, I thought a robust return to work would provide the platform from which I could regain my confidence and acuity and the old surefire know-how in developing new patterns and prints in contemporary wallpaper. But I was wrong, it was much too soon, and consequently my ill-advised desperate measure to spend a day with the paperers on a work site proved calamitous and cost me my job. Devastated, I now faced an unimaginable struggle from a new nadir of alienated defeat. My sense of identity and self-respect had been badly injured and for a time I was immobilized with hopelessness and heartache in my bed. Now I had nothing, no family, no job, no future. Only anguish and loneliness occupied every cell of my pathetic being.

It is impossible to state how many days I spent in bed in that darkened room, but the juncture did come when eating again became vital and I crawled from under the covers and got dressed and squinted in the severe light of a new day. I walked the half-mile to the downtown and entered Borsalino's Delicatessen, where I stood on a line of seven or eight people, trying to decide what I should order. My only concern was satisfying my ravenous hunger, but the good-natured banter and conversation between the counter folks and their customers struck me for its hearty familiarity with one another. The place was renowned for its homemade mozzarella, massive Italian subs, and nonpareil hot dishes, and the Borsalino family who ran it knew everybody in town personally. That is, except me, I realized on line listening to the middle-aged two Borsalino men and woman chatting up their loyal patrons as they prepared their orders. I wondered why I did not know the Borsalinos better by now, insofar as I had lived in the town for years and visited the deli from time to time. They knew my face, knew I was a semi-regular, but whenever I got to the counter we did not talk like the others. There was silence, awkwardly so as it often is when people recognize one another but do not speak. And somewhere during this wait to order my eggplant parmigiana hero I remembered Klibble's insult declaring me a universal failure, and

uncannily auguring this very moment by citing my utter inability to connect with the deli folks resulting in my being a persona non grata. As I got closer to the counter I was too famished to leave but also afraid to prove Klibble right, as I had nothing to say to the Borsalinos and they no doubt would handle me once again like a complete stranger, though I was a familiar face for years. I told myself this time I would engage them in small talk, maybe joke around some. As I felt the gaze of the huskier man with salt-and-pepper hair find my eyes as next in line, I stated without hesitancy: "I will have the eggplant parm." Jittery with performance anxiety, I was grateful to unequivocally announce my desired meal. "The dish or the sandwich?" he returned. "The sandwich," I clarified, disconcerted that I'd omitted such a key detail. I almost added a self-deprecatory utterance at this shortcoming to break the ice, a humorous quip along the lines of: "Some call me Mr. Sandwich, I'll have you know." But the right words would not form quickly enough and he was already busy fixing my hero, kidding an apparent old pal standing in line about his Las Vegas vacation. "What happens there stays there, including your money! Am I right, Artie?" And they shared a good yuk. The other deli man, bald and thin with a sunny countenance, was engaged with two men about a construction project on the waterfront taking forever. "We'll all be long gone by the time that park is done," he said. "It'll be part of the river by then with these storms," said the customer. "So we'll have a marina instead!" the other joked. "It'll be Waterworld around here in a few years," the deli man agreed with a smile. The deli woman, a voluptuous lady with a warm, tender demeanor, was waiting on a young couple and talking about their upcoming wedding plans. I was invisible, a nondescript body no one would ever remember visited the place, that afternoon or any day for that matter, and I thought of Klibble's prescient put-down and doubled down with new determination as I saw my guy circling back to the counter with my steaming hot hero. He tore off a sheet of wax paper and began wrapping it up, asking without looking up if I wanted something to drink with it. Here was my opportunity to toss out a light-hearted jape, so I said the first silly notion that came to mind: "Yes, a gin rickey with a hit of paregoric." I watched his face contort in puzzlement and realized he saw no humor in my quip. Yet, he had to know I was being facetious and could have at least *acknowledged* that in kind, with a smile or chuckle. Concomitantly I took umbrage but also worried my joke missed the mark so completely it only elicited confusion. "Congratulations on being named the best mozzarella in New Jersey," I quickly changed course, "nothing like taking the honor of *numero uno*, baby!" His reaction was reserved. "Well, that was three years

ago. They gave it to Giovanni's in Bloomfield the last two years. But that's all right." He took my money and returned the change. "Hey, we all know you guys have the best mutz in the *world*, not just Jersey. I mean you go to the trouble of using buffalo milk to make yours. That makes the difference." He shook his head, miffed now. "We don't use buffalo milk. Anyone who thinks that is what it takes is delusional." I nodded, mortified of course, and left wondering why I was sure they used buffalo milk, and, moreover, *why the hell do I even bother with people?* I walked the streets in a profoundly melancholy haze, self-loathing and misanthropy lacing every thought, and ultimately I just wanted to get away from everyone and everything and I drove my car in no particular direction but wound up on the Parkway heading south and eventually the shore points came into view and the boyhood ocean memories seemed closer and since it was October those places would be deserted by vacationers and perhaps suitable for solitary contemplation and reflection, so that was where I headed.

As I drove and passed Parkway landmarks, such as the exit for Cheesequake Park and the old Dutchboy Paints sign, boyhood memories came of my father packing us into the Impala in the predawn mists to beat the traffic down on a Saturday to begin our week vacation in Ocean Grove. The eager, impatient excitement of those rides was palpable now, and the "I Spy" games of spotting passing cars the family played to pass the time never seemed to quell the question of how much further till we were there. Boogie boards, sand digs, boardwalk games and treats, it all awaited our arrival to hit the beach running, and all these years later only fond, cherished remembrances passed through my thoughts. Certainly, there was no traumatic, indelible encounter with a seagull that fundamentally left enough damage on my psyche to impair my development as a functioning adult. But it seemed the further south I drove and the more I savored those memories of innocent times the more I began to ponder exactly why had my subconscious chosen the seagull as the most terrifying monster to haunt my nightmares? While my focus had been predominantly to contravene and repudiate Dr. Klibble's conclusions about a traumatic encounter with a hostile seagull, I neglected to properly investigate the impetus behind the conjuring of these odious birds in my sleep. Klibble emphasized the stark profound fear they struck in me, yet I always believed it was more complex and mysterious than that. The gulls of my nightmares produced pure visceral horror while casting an ominous, inescapable shadow of doom. My conscious mind experienced no such reactions when exposed to the shore birds, or at least I felt no fear while awake contemplating their havoc

upon my nightly slumbers. I decided to put this dichotomy to the test at Ocean Grove by seeking seagulls on the beach and confronting them directly. Perhaps bold encounters with my nemeses in which I looked them in the eye and let them know what's what would enlighten me to insights or epiphanies towards understanding the nightmares' origins.

Ocean Grove in late October had an unsettling, forsaken character not well known to the vacationers long back to work and school, and while I found the old landmarks bemusing, the Victorian classical splendor of years past took on a gothic sepulchral element that left me thinking of life slipping past us all. A resigned bleakness overtook me and, desperate for a drink I sought a bar briefly before recalling the town was dry, and tooled over to Bradley Beach searching for a liquor store. It was during this drive when I passed a tidy clapboard house with a lemonade porch that drew my recognition on some instinctual level, and I had to pull over. The old-timey park with a gazebo and the duck pond nearby, the ocean only two blocks away, it was all familiar to me, only during days long gone of sunshine and custard and riding waves. Now it was barren and overcast and almost illusory as I stood on the sidewalk gazing at the white dwelling with green trim, the tiny front yard and the weather vane atop a pole to the side. The vane was a metallic seagull with wings spread and beak upward, which I did not remember but it jarred me when I noticed the bird. I remained stock-still, staring at the former summer house of a girl I met down there when I was fourteen. She was skinny and wore halter tops at night and had long straight blonde hair and a very pretty face. I crashed into her riding a wave body surfing and she said I ought to "watch it," even after I said I was sorry. And then I saw her laughing at me with her friend, both about my age, and I was smitten as I saw her body surf with an abandoned glee. Later, noticing them on the boardwalk, I mustered the gumption to buy her a sno-cone for my transgression, and we hung out for the next two weeks. I was head over heels for this girl, Tracy, and she seemed to dig me too. I remained motionless surveying the porch on which I once stood stricken with anxiety as I knocked on the door and waited for someone to come. "Is Tracy home?" I blurted, and her mother with a skeptical smile called, "Trace, there's a young man here for you." And she came out with the white halter over her tan body and I could hardly contain my exultation at such a night before us, nerves notwithstanding. We would cop some beer and drink on the beach and talk about our Jersey lives and make out. I remembered her now vividly as scenes passed through my

mind, and I forgot where I was for a bit when a screen door opened and closed shut before I realized a woman emerged from the house and sat on a chair on the porch. Taken with her raw pulchritude, I could not refrain from gawking at her as she sat with a book and a glass of wine. She had a blonde bob and wore jeans and a sweater that she seemed to fill out just right. She could have been in her thirties or forties, I could not tell, but she once looked over my way, probably sensed me staring at her, and our eyes met for several seconds and, of course, I began speculating, if not mooning, that perhaps fate somehow led me back to the girl I loved one summer at the sea shore. The notion, alas, was fleeting as I decided she looked a tad too good to be a contemporary of mine and dismissed it, or at least I thought I did. Such romantic fancies have a way of lingering. The old liquor store on the road across the beach was still there, and as I went in to buy a pint of rye I recollected how Tracy and I used to wait outside for the appropriate customer (biker, hippy type) to pull up for us to enlist in buying us beer. Kids would not try that nowadays, I mused with an inner chuckle.

I set out for the boardwalk and savored the misty panorama of the ocean breakers delivering their rows of whitecaps. Sipping rye and reflecting on the windswept desolate beach I felt some stirrings within of finding the will and wherewithal to make it back from so precipitous a fall as I'd had. And then I saw them amidst the spray of surf and salt air towards the jetty, a small flock of seagulls, promenading about with purpose to no avail of their usual in-season beach forages. They appeared to be agitated and flapped their wings with great tempestuousness, perhaps wondering where all the dopes with the food had gone. I took a good hit of rye and told myself this was an opportunity to confront these creatures head on and maybe see what's what with the nightmares plaguing my sleep for years. As I trudged across the damp beach I felt no real fear, only a strong sense of curiosity and exploration into the subconscious depths of the unknown and what may lurk there, hidden and stalking me in other realms. I swallowed another pull of rye and further steeled myself for any contingency, knowing such a showdown was necessary and a long time coming in order to resolve my debilitating sleep disorder and condition. As I neared them I counted seven gulls, stock-still, beaks upward apprehensively, and felt the full weight of their glowers upon me. At approximately ten feet from them I halted and we stared at each other, the rough waves crashing behind them and the white foam just reaching their planted clawed feet. We remained silent, staring like that for a long tense minute before I pulled out my pint of

rye and swigged some. The birds exuded a creepy menace and instilled a sudden self-doubt in me, despite my ratiocination rejecting any such projection onto simple wildlife. A struggle inside me raged now and finally the only measure I was capable of carrying out was pouring a few drams of rye into a sea shell lying in the sand between us. "Go ahead, my fine feathered friends, wet your beaks on me. I wish to forge a pact of amity with you. I bear you no ill will. I only hold you in unqualified esteem." They demurred, conferring quietly with one another, before the lead gull with a large twitchy head and weathered plumage stepped towards the shell and bent down his beak for a taste. The others soon followed until the rye was gone, and now they marched spasmodically around me. "Don't try anything stupid. You will certainly regret it," I cautioned. They had me encircled when they rose above me and hovered in place, flapping their wings and gazing at me, almost uncertain what to make of me now. They began squawking and screeching in great agitation and I kept repeating: "What! What! You know you better leave me alone from here on in!" And with that they flew all around my head with a strange gull sound that struck me as laughter, derisive seagull cackling, before they soared away in a wedge over the ocean and I watched them land way out at the tip of the jetty.

It was clear to me now that I would have to spend the night in Ocean Grove and I walked the streets close to the beach searching for the right place. A couple of blocks inland on the wide promenade called Ocean Pathway I spotted the timeworn antiquated hotel my family stayed in now and again when I was a boy. It was a fading white with black trim and its name in large letters across the wooden frame: The Albatross. It struck me as a gambling saloon of the Wild West somehow, maybe the way the top of the façade formed intermittent squares. A dump now, but back in the day the joint seemed swanky for the reserved Victorian town. I decided to book a room there and a very old man, gaunt and squinty, gave me the key to a small one on the third floor. I was one of the very few guests, a husky disheveled fellow in a dowdy suit and a woman in a yellow jumper reading in the parlor with a little girl beside her the only ones I'd seen as I checked in. I remembered my uncle came down for a day once and he sat in that same parlor, maybe that same chair, and he called me over as I came back from the beach and began heading up the stairs, not seeing him in the darkened parlor. "Where are you going in such a goddamn hurry?!" he asked with a wry grin. "Nowhere," I said. "Just up there." He nodded knowingly and called me over and I thought I smelled liquor on him. He was out of work, before he

got the welding gig. “Don’t be running away from anything, you hear?” I nodded and continued up the stairs, not sure why he admonished me like that. Now, all these years later, I sort of knew. My room was miniscule with a twin bed and a warped creaky floor and no air-conditioning, but it would do. So many forgotten memories of the Albatross, fleeting images of those days, flitted through me and I needed to get some air.

In the lobby I caught sight of a sign advertising a lecture coming to the Great Auditorium in conjunction with a psychiatrists’ convention. The poster was on the wall behind the player piano, not very prominently displayed, and I moved closer to its red, yellow and gray hues with bold black lettering. It was just a fluke that my eyes picked it up and most folks would take it for a curio from another time advertising an evening of a lecture among conventioners. The black-and-white photo of mostly men seated in an auditorium, many with full beards and monocles and walking canes, appeared from another era, yet the date of the event was current, starting in fact the very next day. The keynote lecturer was what floored me though: Dr. Gunther P. Stolonik. The shrink from Neptune Klibble tried to foist upon me because of his expertise in avian concerns vis-à-vis mental health. He looked like the sort of fellow who would be selling snake oil elixirs from a wagon two centuries ago, sporting a mustache and long beard and a three-piece pin-striped woolen suit. I studied the poster for a while and was bewildered and entranced, looking around for someone to inquire about it but found myself alone in the parlor. A curiosity welled up in me, a sudden interest what this quaint gathering could be all about, particularly Dr. Stolonik’s address connecting the exposure to certain birds and disorders of the brain. In my deep musing the words, *I must attend this lecture and see for myself*, came off my tongue. Now I felt a large hand on my shoulder from behind and turned to find a bearded gentleman with wire-rim spectacles and an old-fashioned suit express in evident delight: “You will not regret it, friend. Everyone should hear what Dr. Stolonik has to say. He speaks to the larger truths.” He smiled slightly and began away towards the front door. I followed him from a distance as he proceeded west on the Ocean Pathway for two blocks and turned left on a narrow street lined with tented bungalows. He strode at a brisk clip until about one-hundred feet in this street he halted on a dime and pivoted to hail another man, bedecked in an antiquated frock and sporting muttonchops, moving away from him on the cross street. I quickly hid behind an elm tree as I observed the two men now greet one another and converse briefly before entering one of the bungalows. And then almost

involuntarily I advanced towards this bungalow and without hesitation opened the front door and entered. I will never forget the next several moments, as six or seven of these characters in the obsolete garb and facial hair and wire-rim glasses, one smoking a meerschaum pipe, turned impassively to look at me and we stood locked in stares for about ten seconds before birds began flying maniacally about the cramped space, hundreds of all kinds of birds flew every which way in an agitated mass of chaos, ultimately dive-bombing and surrounding my head. I screamed and desperately tried to swat them away as I noticed the gentlemen doubled over in peals of laughter. I cursed them in my screams...and ran the hell out of there and did not stop until I passed the old-timey luncheonette that was once an apothecary, Nagle's, which I remembered from my boyhood vacations. I hurried inside and found a stool at the counter and ordered the old Jersey staple, Taylor ham, along with eggs, toast and home fries, hoping to simply forget the disturbing episode with the birds through the nostalgia of such an establishment unblemished by time. Of course, nothing could dismiss such a scene of grim tumult from consciousness, inscrutable air attacks on one's person tend to linger in the nether of one's anxieties. My hunger sated, my frayed nerves were raw though tempered by a stuffed weariness.

I went for a long walk to the liquor store in the next town and bought more rye, this time a fifth, before I took to the beach to trudge along the surf and tipple in the misty dusk. I covered a good mile of beach and turned back towards Ocean Grove as darkness descended fully, making out a tiny light in the distance which I hoped to reach. It turned out to be a small bonfire with several individuals quietly sitting around it drinking and smoking. Nobody seemed to notice me as I caught but glimpses of their faces in the fire's incandescence, their conversations were low, incomprehensible murmurs. I found a spot in the circle to sit and swigged my rye, somehow drawing solace in joining the group of strangers. The one to my right swung his head towards me and I saw his sunken eyes and rotten teeth and scarred cheek as he rasped words at me in an apparent command. "What? I can't hear you?" But he spoke again and I realized I could hear him all right but could not understand him, perhaps a foreign tongue I thought now. They were passing around a long pipe and I took a hit and caught a glimmering glance across the fire of someone I recognized, the woman I had seen earlier on the porch of the house of my old girlfriend from many years ago. I could not refrain from staring at her and she appeared very beautiful in the luminosity of the moving flames. Could she be Tracy from that cherished fling

one fleeting summer? I asked myself now. I quaffed rye and wished it true, though the folks around the fire, from those I could perceive, seemed an odd, macabre lot, sullen and damaged and even dangerous, and what in the world was this beautiful woman of my fascination doing out here with them? I wondered. An older man with a bandaged nose and dark swelling and stitches above his right eye tapped my arm and passed me the pipe again. I asked him what they were smoking and he answered in a few unintelligible syllables before turning towards those to his left and uttering more gibberish which elicited their giggles. I drew on the pipe and passed it on, noticing the woman from the porch gazing my way. I smiled at her and she flashed back a momentary, demure one of her own. The peculiar murmurings of the group rose and fell in waves and increasingly aroused my consternation, albeit the strange beauty across the flames almost entirely preoccupied my attention. I was indeed quite smitten and after a spell I could not sit there idly watching her. I got up and moved around the circle and her eyes were upon me as I neared her. I stood behind her in the darkness and took a belt of rye, hoping she would come. I knew she would and she did, but only after I waited for ten minutes or so but what seemed an eternity. I offered her rye, she downed a gulp, and extended her palm to my cheek as our eyes locked. "You are beautiful," I said. She blushed and looked away. "Who are you?" she asked. "I knew you many years ago when we were just kids down here one summer. We had a thing for each other, hung out every day. I'm Graham Hargrove...you always called me by my last name though. Hargrove. And you're Tracy." "Hargrove," she said softly with a distant look, then smiling as she took my hand and we went for a stroll along the surf. "I remember you," she said after a long silence, "you were very sweet. You would do anything for me." "Yeah, well, any red-blooded boy back then would kill just to spend time with you. You were something else." She chuckled. "I liked that you were nervous too. It showed you cared what I thought." I snickered. "Cared too much. Thank God we copped beer at that liquor store." "On the beach at night drinking together...here we are again." She laughed and took a sip of the rye. "I can't believe I found you again." I wanted to know more about her, the life she led since that summer, but because she would then inevitably ask me about my life I refrained from such questions. And she likewise held back, probably for the same reason. She stopped to pick up a large conch shell and put it to her ear. A whitecap's foam came rolling up close our feet. "I can hear the ocean," she said. I smiled and replied, "The ocean's right there." She moved towards me and became serious. "Not that ocean. The one you and I rode waves in back in the day." I held her gaze.

“Same ocean, same girl and boy. No reason we couldn’t pick up where we left off.” I was going to kiss her when she thrust the conch shell at me, and bade me: “Listen!” I held it to my ear and no discernible sound came. When I brought my arm down she insisted I continue to listen and as I did the most extraordinary, eerie sounds of a crowded beach came through, waves breaking, radios blaring a baseball game, lifeguard whistles, and the unmistakable cries of kids swimming in the ocean. She watched the astonishment register on my face and smiled and exclaimed, “That’s the ocean I’m talking about, Hargrove! The ocean is the healer that we come back to when we are wounded. Those people you joined at the bonfire are lonely spirits who are hurt bad and pretty ruined. They seek strength in one another. No one else even knows they exist.” I could not process what she said without questions, but there was no time for she hugged me hard and we began kissing, quickly tumbling to the surf where we really went at it and were on the verge of making love when she suddenly pushed me off and scrambled up to go rushing into the ocean.

I called her back and ran after her to rein her in, but she had too much of a jump and all I could do was join her and look out for her in our crazy ocean night dip. I had never been in the ocean at night before and it was dismaying with an almost unreal dread to it. The waves were high and very powerful, much rougher than I ever encountered, and with limited visibility avoiding direct hits from the crashing breakers was a challenge. She swam far out, yelling once: “C’mon, Hargrove! It’s calmer out here!” I tried to follow her but she soon disappeared from my sight beyond the shimmers of moonlight. “Tracy! Where are you?!” I shouted, and swam farther and farther out, several times getting clobbered by mammoth waves and going under like a broken doll. Reaching a placid stretch of ocean I continued to shout for Tracy, dire as I hadn’t heard her voice crying out for several minutes now. I caught a riptide and swam along with its strength sweeping me swifter and deeper out to sea, and as I embraced its inexorable pull I remained hopeful that I’d somehow find Tracy and be able to save her. But in relatively short order my priority shifted by necessity to one of my very own survival. I was so far offshore now I could not see any lights anywhere, even the direction back to the beach was lost to me. I treaded water while drifting as long as I could, but my alcohol consumption worked against my stamina and over time I began to succumb to the depths. Twice I gave out and plunged under only to summon the fortitude to resurface again. The third time I submerged helplessly and knew I was a goner, though in desperation weakly flailed my

arms and legs in plummeting and felt stringy cords of flesh fasten to my wrist and uphold me with a jerk before enveloping my head. Horrified, my last drops of adrenaline catapulted a delirious flight response and I fought and wrenched myself free of the creature, barely making it up to air, nearly taking in water along the way. I struggled to breathe and stay afloat and as I searched around for any makeshift buoy such as driftwood to prevent my imminent drowning I was greeted by a veritable armada of deadly monstrous Portuguese-man-of-wars, surrounding my fading form in their tentacled virulent humps of savagery. All my reserves were completely spent and all I could do was tread water and shiver and shudder and fight to keep my head above water enough to breathe, all the while watching them steadily and synchronously close in on me. Some appeared freakishly large and the slimy flesh glistened in the pale shaft of moonlight and I caught sight of long, thick agglomerations of the tentacles, roiling with rage beneath the surface. I thought of Klibble and his tanks and how gratified and relieved I had felt to finally extricate myself from his vile clutches and now, drowning in the ocean darkness legions of his *boys* had me encircled and were coming to vanquish me. Rather than let them reach me I ended my futile struggle and went under, dropping fast, a quick demise seemed imminent...until they got to me with their tentacles, hundreds of the creatures swaddling every inch of my body with the formidable ghastly lashes and bringing me above water, their trophy and prize to now ritualistically torture in a slow, miserable death. I bled and screamed as they tightened the tentacles to the limits of human endurance and I screamed more when they floated me along their victory fleet parade farther and farther out to sea. My life was ebbing from all the pain and exposure and loss of blood, but the sons of bitches weren't finished with me. They began dividing and marshalling into smaller flotillas, performed with the order and precision of naval maneuvers, until there were five masses of flotillas each assigned to an extremity and one to my head. They wrapped my hands, feet, and neck in their tentacles and slowly at first, though building a head of steam, shoved off in opposite directions. In my suffering semiconsciousness I knew what they were doing: I was being drawn and quartered by the multitude of evil humps around me in the ocean and I cried out weakly for death to take me fast, but it did not as the humps were no horses and their heinous murder would be slower, protracted, so I lasted throughout the long unspeakable pain of their pulling me five ways until I was asunder...and I thought of Tracy that summer I loved her and why the brutal evanescence of life lurks beneath every transcendent moment we come by.

And then I found myself strewn on the beach in the predawn vapors, motionless and sore, acutely aware of my labored breathing. It soon came crashing back, the harrowing attack upon me out at sea and that nameless fear gripped me all over again, and the perplexity of my being ashore was overwhelming. I rejected the idea that I dreamed it all and never left the beach. There was too much evidence to the contrary, starting with my battered and bloodied body, the stripy contusions suggestive of the tentacles' constriction, pussy nodules the vestiges of stings, and as I slowly gathered myself enough to get up and totter about the beach in the wan first light of the morning, the burnt blackened driftwood of the bonfire where I met Tracy. I mostly thought of her and our chance chimerical reunion, the romance and excitement of it, and my agonizing anguish over her presumptive fate in the unforgiving waves of the relatively calm ocean I now ruminated upon. And yet the very dreamlike element of the time spent with her and my seemingly doomed encounter with the sea creatures in the darkness led my mind to speculate if there could be some other explanation. I only took a few draws on the pipe they were passing around the bonfire, some variety of cannabis, so initially it seemed inconceivable this could have triggered a hallucinatory psychotic experience. Unless, I further thought, it had been treated with a hallucinogen. But as I lumbered along the surf pondering the strange occurrences of the previous evening I ultimately dismissed this notion. I refused to believe any drug could produce the wholesale aberrant episode which would account for the overnight ordeal I found myself in far offshore. Sure, one may think, the physical evidence of my beaten condition could have been produced through other ways which I misapprehended through the prism of a psychedelic, but I remembered every detail and horror of my clash with and capture by the creatures too vividly for this to be the handiwork of a chemical. And the post-bonfire time spent with Tracy too was all indelibly striking to me now as I moved through the foamy surf peering into the ocean horizon, fearing the worst for her out there.

Bereft of the truth and lost in a forlorn timeworn shore town of my youth, I trudged through the surf for a very long stretch, watching the seagulls soar over the waves and hearing their shrill cacophonous cries conspiratorially pierce the overcast quietude of the early morning. One seagull broke from its flock and glided low towards the boardwalk, disappearing inland until returning with intense velocity straight in my direction. It seemed on course to collide with my head but I refused to capitulate to its menace and kept walking close to the

water. But as the bastard drew near an instinctual self-preservation came over me as I knew it would not veer away at the last second, I knew it would fly into my head kamikaze style, and so I hit the deck when the decisive moment came. As I began to pick myself up, on my hands and knees, I was startled to suddenly find myself face to face with my feathered tormentor, his piercing contemptuous glower boring into my eyes. We remained so riveted in ocular deadlock and I recall trepidation felt over making any slightest movement, any faint recession from this bird's disdain. It was the gull who broke the spell, however, by bursting into a paroxysm of fluttered wings and flight inches from my face and it was I who shrieked as if I'd fallen from a roof, collapsing prostrate. He hovered over me aflutter in conquest for a bit and I once looked up and would swear until this day the bastard was laughing, as much as a seagull can laugh at a person he has beaten. I cursed it and cautiously rose and retreated, and its scowl stayed on me after I turned away from it as I could feel the loathing radiating from its eyes on my back. And when I looked back I could tell it was laughing again, derisively.

I shambled on across the early morning pale gray beach, deserted and stark, and began towards the modest clapboard house I found the day before where Tracy used to live during summers so many years ago. A light shone in an upstairs window and for a second my heart leapt. *Maybe she made it back* I told myself, moving up the porch steps and knocking on the door progressively louder as a sea breeze rustled the yellowish curtains in the open windows. When no one came I looked around the early empty street and tried the knob, entering as it opened. The small old-fashioned parlor seemed preserved and uninhabited in its perfection. I proceeded up the stairs to the lighted room. A filigreed relic of a lamp diffused a thin lambent glow to the bedroom, where I realized someone was lying under the covers. I moved to the foot of the bed and identified the sleeper as the woman I encountered on the beach the night before, Tracy. Relieved and heartened she had somehow escaped the maw of the briny deep, I stood over her for several minutes gazing at her blonde beauty stretched in restorative repose. She turned once and glimpsed me from semi-consciousness, smiling faintly with heavy eyelids, whispering what sounded like, "It's you." I leaned over her and placed my hand over hers. "Thank God you're okay," I said softly. "I feared the worst." She slowly sat up and searched my eyes and sighed. "I thought you were gone too." She took my hand and pulled me towards her and I sat beside her in bed. We remained silent like that for a space, I didn't know where to begin.

I noticed a framed photograph on her night table of a seagull, portrait style from the breast up, severe in mien. “Friend of yours?” I asked, gesturing towards the picture. She smiled, regarding the gull’s gaze. “They’ve become so aggressive down here in recent years...this one has been coming to my window every day forever. I throw him popcorn kernels and he catches them in his beak. Now he brings others along. I’m in it too deep with them to stop.” I glanced at the lone window of the room to the right of the bed. “How’s that?” I asked. “They’ll get over it if you do.” She took a deep breath and looked away. “Gordon is very persistent, his flock counts on me...” I let out a chuckle. “Gordon?” She laughed softly. “That’s what I call him. I dreamed of him and that was his name.” “You dream about seagulls?” I blurted. She nodded. I told her about my nightmares and Dr. Klibble and the disturbing experience that morning on the beach with the menacing gull. “You have to accept their presence, listen to them,” she advised. She seemed to harbor some rarified knowledge and I pressed her on it. “What happened to us last night in the ocean with those creatures?!” I demanded. “I am not your Tracy from your summer at the shore way back when,” she said dispassionately. She explained that her family only vacationed at Ocean Grove twice and not the year I had been talking about. She did have a fling once but was certain now the boy was not me. As she spoke I realized she was right. Most of my remembrances of our supposed time together she did not share, or she “vaguely” recalled at best. And my memory of her reminiscences was sketchy, the beer and the boardwalk fooling around between us seemed generic in retrospect. We were remembering other kids from our pasts, not each other. “We are not who we thought we were,” I said, adding after a pause, “and we each thought the other died but here we are.” She gazed into my eyes and said, “I wanted you to be the boy I really knew but you are an imposter.” “You’re a fake yourself,” I replied, embracing her in my arms suddenly and moving in to kiss her. She offered her lips with a carnal gusto and we quickly became entwined in a hot-blooded crescendo of concupiscence on her bed until the very last moment before I entered her she suddenly recoiled and pushed me back. “Gordon and his pals are watching! I can’t take it!” she cried, gaping behind me at the window. I turned and saw them, four or five seagulls perched right outside peering in at us. There was something eerily anthropomorphic about their features which made them seem lecherous and depraved and I could tell which one was Gordon, the ringleader, and I let out a gasp, a garbled imprecation, as the whilom Tracy already vacated the bed and scampered out the door.

I ran after her down the stairs and out into the early morning shore mist, tearing up her desolate street the way I had come, back towards the ocean. She was gone but I kept looking for her as I reached the boardwalk and followed its path paralleling the Ocean Grove beach, the ocean vista of whitecaps breaking and seagulls gliding, an aesthetic scene for most, but disturbing and dismaying for me. The boardwalk of boyhood summers led me along and I was sick with distrust and confusion over the world around me, lost and lonely in the forsaken shore town that had seen better days. Through the gray early morning mists came a singular sort of chamber music, faint and mysterious in its distance, plaintive, even elegiac, albeit oddly stirring and whimsical in its fey lugubrious allure. I continued apace towards the music until at length the band higgledy-piggledy manifested out of the shifting drifts of fog, playing under an ancient boardwalk pavilion on a platform with a scattered audience seated on chairs before them. The musicians, older men in dark shabby suits and felt hats, played an odd variety of wood and brass instruments including the cello, double bass, trombone, viola, bassoon, flugelhorn, and I think an oboe was in there too. Their faces betrayed no emotion at all, only intense focus on the strange somber music they were playing. Stark sweet melodies descended into martial sonorities, while splendid otherworldly passages somehow drove home the rich themes of the compositions in spades. My desperate, beaten-down condition may have left me vulnerable, but I was deeply moved by the utterly singular sounds of this band. I stood motionless in a reverie listening to them, casting an inward eye towards the ocean and hearing the series of shrill cries from the dive-bombing seagulls over the beach. The audience, about a dozen downtrodden tramps who appeared meditative and grateful for the musical interlude, like churchgoers seeking answers, did not notice me in the least as I settled into a chair towards the back. I thought of Tracy and the romantic passion kindled in our meeting the night before, the impetus being our mutual belief that we had a dalliance many years earlier at that very shore town. When this mirage faded this morning and we recognized we were not who we thought we were, the relationship changed but the two imposters maintained their desire for one another. Maybe it increased as the truth between us was laid bare. It did for me. I thought of men and women married for fifty years who really don't know one another at all. You always read about such couples, their secret lives and betrayals. How much can one person really know another? Not much, I began to understand, just as there is often a great deal we don't know about ourselves and many lives are driven by delusions and chimerical ambitions and false beliefs of one's true self. As I sat listening to the dark droll music

of this improbable band I pondered the flimsy foundation of the very *raison d'être* supporting my own dreams, that of being someone destined for great things as an artist of some kind, that immortality awaited beyond all the pain and the myriad slights and disappointments, and that this was all but a tortuous illusion and no such magnificent destiny was ever in the cards. A profound sorrow suddenly overwhelmed me and I doubled over and held my face in my hands in anguish, only to slowly again come out of it as if the *artist* idea of my life, long the fire of my soul, had gone out and thus purged anew I was raw and vulnerable.

At length I rose and stumbled away, drifting down to the beach and gravitating towards a group of folks gathered faraway near an old weather-beaten pier, and an incipient peculiar sense of new freedom manifested in me as I did. They were cooking on a grill over a fire pit in the sand, the smoke smelled intense and robust, I figured about twenty-five enthusiasts in period costumes circa turn of the last century. A barbershop quartet was singing quaint old numbers and the men all wore waxed mustaches and boaters and checked suits while the women were in petticoats and held parasols. The cooks working the grill were in period fisherman garb and carving their catch right from the nets and throwing the pieces into the pit to roast over the wild flames. I walked among these people and no one seemed to notice me. I addressed one bearded fellow with an extremely large waxed mustache that jutted a good foot from each side of his face. "Are you some kind of historical reenactor?" I asked. He looked right through me and only said: "I am a man of commerce and do not believe I know you." They all stuck to their characters like that, pretending it was 1885 or whatever, Cleveland was president, and I was an interloper. As I neared the barbecue pit I saw what they were grilling, the quartered humps thrown haphazardly into the fire, the masses of stringy flesh attached to each, the repellent imagery of so many hunks of Portuguese-man-of-wars burning together in smoking swarms in the great pit! Awful consternation and ghastly trauma overcame me as I flashed back to the horrors of last night's attack at sea and everywhere I turned these demented reenactors who would not break character for a second were devouring the foul ocean meat and wolfing down tentacles like ravenous animals. "Sir, have you no decency?" I cried to a stout man lowering still sizzling tentacles dripping in the creatures' natural oils into his open mouth, and I watched in frightful disbelief as he sucked them down. "Oh, you must try one!" he then shouted at me, almost in punishment for my impudence. I retreated but he followed me, yelling: "You must eat a man-of-war! Seize

that man! Do not let him leave!” Before they realized what was happening I nearly broke clear from the body of the barbecue people and running at full stride only one or two of them now had a chance to take me down, and as I pivoted away from the larger man with a long beard and clay pipe the other, slight, bespectacled, with red muttonchops, blindsided me with a hard tackle from behind. Immediately at least a dozen of the men had swarmed around and hoisted me up over their heads, carrying me back to the barbecue pit. Several men, evidently the leaders, now spoke in a kind of antiquated rhetoric about my not being of sound mind and the civic and moral duty falling to them in ensuring I was treated fairly and afforded every opportunity to demonstrate respect and understanding for their mores and traditions. Then very quickly it became apparent that the only hope I had of achieving this was scarfing down one of the grilled Portuguese man-of-wars, and when I balked at such a vile prospect they persisted and when I tried to bolt they pinned me down and force fed me the man-of-war meat and the countless tentacles attached. When it was over I must have eaten close to a pound of the meat, which beyond my initial revulsion and sickness I improbably acquired an apercu into the extreme gustation they apparently prized and it became more palatable and my captors did not have to coerce my ingestion with quite as much vigor. Though the tentacles can be a tad chewy, the man-of-war flesh has a pungent, succulent taste with a briny uncompromising blast of the deep sea in its overall effect. While the desire to puke remained throughout the ordeal, I concomitantly continued masticating with a curious voracity that seemed to understand the epicurean potential of the macabre meat. I am convinced it was this brief display of discovering their demented delight in man-of-war barbecue that disarmed their violent fury and had them entreating me to enlist in their federation. They said they had clothes for me to change into straightaway, which conformed to their culture and way of life. It took all I had to keep them at bay, swearing I'd be back to join their cause before skedaddling with phony fond farewells and bolting at full tilt to the Albatross once I receded from their sight.

I raced up the stairs of the stodgy fleabag hotel of my boyhood memories and despite its near empty forsakenness felt its warm embrace, the harbor of its time-enchanted musty walls from the aberrant chaos of the world outside. I needed a drink, I needed to talk to someone, a rational judicious person to hear me out and offer counsel. Mostly, through the mystique of the Albatross where my mother and father and brother and

sister and I all stayed on several vacations many years ago, I longed for their company again, their comfort and jagged but mighty love. I conjured them in my room as I sat on the squeaky bed or, rather, they called to me. After spending entire days on the beach we would be marching back to the Albatross, sunburned and waterlogged, the five of us, if not the perfect family, but connected to one another in inscrutable nameless ways that ran the gamut and make you appreciate inspired absurdity in life. Kids fresh, silly, violent, exultant, angry, loud, sulky, querulous, rambunctious, raucous, sad, cruel, loving, we were all of them, together, always together. The hotel furnished such imagery and my mother and father's watchful presence ever hovering on the penumbra, their gaze I felt once again now sitting on the bed, their nearness seemed real. And then I remembered the "suite" we always rented was on the top floor and suddenly knew I had to go up there and see it again. I ascended the warped stairs to the fourth floor and began down the dim narrow corridor to the last door on the right, the ancient unlit sconces lining the walls, gryphons once breathing luminosity now rusting in oblivion. I stood there outside the door for a good while until the faint sounds of children laughing seemed to emanate from within. Once I was in there playing and laughing like that, I thought, and now I am here in the corridor, a lonely, broken man. The boy in that room who was me so many years ago never could conceive of the stark turns life can take on you, that make the early years for some of us the very best which ironically render the hard times to come all the more worse. The laughter stopped altogether. I knocked and when no one came I began to leave and a man, tall, lanky, wearing maroon denim overalls on a piebald turtleneck, in his sixties carrying a wooden box with a handle, appeared out of nowhere in my path. He had a ruddy, hardy mug and seemed lost in his thoughts as he approached me with an unusual saunter. Then his eyes widened as they met mine and his gaze bore into me until I wondered if he could be deranged. "Who are you?" he asked quizzically, planting himself to take me in. I told him my name. "And what brings you here to The Albatross?" I almost said it was none of his business and he could get lost, but he asked in such an amiable way I explained that I used to stay there with my family on vacations as a kid. He chortled and nodded as he said: "I came down here as a kid too and never left in my mind. For over forty years I've been trying to make it back here but never knew it. But I made it back, as you did, and I will die here." "Well, I'm just here for a visit," I said, "certainly not to die." He swung his rangy arm towards me and poked my side with a chuckle. "Of course you're not, nobody

thinks they're going to die unless they're on a deathbed. But you got to go out somewhere and some of us want to get that right."

I told him I felt dead already and dwelling on death would not help. I told him how the hotel made me grieve for my family and he offered to let me into the suite for a look around. He already had out a jangly chain of keys and was about to stick one in the lock to open the door when I interjected: "Hey, do you work here? I think the room is occupied, even though nobody answered when I knocked." He smiled benignly and said, "None of that matters, son. Do you want to see your old suite or not?" I nodded that I did, adding that I did not catch his name. "Gray Sleeveport," he snapped, performing a little jig before adding, "It is a fine day for a fellow like you to reconnect with your Ocean Grove past." He flapped his arms and let out cawing noises for a few moments and then he opened the door, proclaiming: "Let us go into the past, the best place to live. They tell you when you're young that the future is wide open, life is what you make of it. That is all a load of hooley. The *past* is really what you make of it. It is much more *malleable* and will conform to the person we believe we were and the life we lived." Though the two rooms of "the suite" seemed much smaller they remained very much as I remembered them, twin beds, a chiffonier, Chippendale chairs, and Persian rugs in each. Everything was perfectly in order and a coat of dust had settled on the furniture. "It looks like nobody has stayed here for a while," I observed. "See, I told you," Gray said with a smirk. "I don't think you said—" He set down his wooden box and held up two fingers in a grip on an invisible baseball, commenced winding up and delivering the pitch. "Curveball, Hargrove. Life throws them at you," he said so solemnly I thought he could be joking. "Know what matters," he went on, "cause most find out too late." I began to think the man had been drinking, which reminded me of how much I needed some whiskey.

The rooms gave me goose bumps as I remembered items still in place, such as the portrait of William Jennings Bryant hung in my parents' room, the ornately carved hat rack, the 19th Century photographs of ocean scenes on our walls, several featuring seagulls, and the mahogany four-shelf bookcase I came to know so well since my siblings each slept in the beds, while I, being the youngest, drew the cot which was set up beside the bookcase. Invariably I would waken by six just too excited about the day at the beach ahead to fall back asleep, and my family would all be snoozing for another couple of hours so I'd lay on the cot staring at the titles beside me.

Some I tried to read, like “Call of the Wild,” “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” and “Robinson Crusoe,” while others captivated me with their leather-bound cryptic worlds impervious to my juvenile perusals. Chesterton, Hegel, Pascal, Milton, Dante, Tennyson, all remained on the shelves, and a volume that suddenly struck me now with a vivid recollection of randomly selecting it one dawn and opening it to leave a message concealed therein for some future reader to find. The book was “The Magic Mountain” by Thomas Mann and with nervous fascination I leafed through its reams of pages seeking my boyhood words, eager to know whether they were still there or was it a false memory. I was beginning to think the latter when I came to page 237 and found the following words scrawled along the margins: “Graham Hargrove wrote in this book at 5:46am on July 22, 1962. If you’re reading this in the future you can look me up because I will be in the future too and by then I will know the secret of life and why we are living on planet Earth. If I don’t know it by then, maybe you will and can tell me. We can all be blown apart by then though and then it won’t matter.” There was also a drawing of a man’s face with a long beard and crazy eyes and an atomic mushroom cloud all around him. Eerily he echoed the strange gang I ran across earlier on the beach. I just stood there transfixed by what I wrote and drew in blue ink on page 237 and 238 decades ago, a very pensive speculation by a young boy, likely a product of comic books, cold war, and catechism of the times. I turned to show it to Gray, but he had disappeared and when I looked for him in the other room he wasn’t there either.

The window that opened to the roof was wide open and the white lace curtains swayed in the breeze and I heard someone moving around out there. “Gray!” I called. “Is that you out there?” “C’mon out and join me, Hargrove! Don’t be afraid. It is a stupendous out here. Come!” I climbed outside and was immediately struck by the breathtaking panorama of Victorian Ocean Grove and its houses and promenades and shoreline and whitecaps rushing towards the sands. I walked around the flat roof with the October sky hung with some striking clouds and found Gray on the other side of the chimney, sitting at a picnic table strewn with fruit and meats and bread and wine. “Over here, Hargrove!” he called upon seeing me. He poured me a glass of wine and I made a roast beef sandwich. “Where did all the food come from?” I asked. He chuckled, sipped his wine and said: “Did you not see me carrying a wooden box? Every day I picnic somewhere in town and today you led me here.” I told him about my discovery in “The Magic Mountain.” “Well, Hargrove,” he said, “let’s hear

it, the secret of life!” I just shook my head and drank more wine and gazed out over the grand views of the old ocean town, thinking there is no enlightenment to what it all means. I almost said there is nothing and that is the secret. Yet I could not wholly believe in disbelief either: “I believe that there are answers out there that are beyond our understanding.” We clinked glasses and Gray said: “Believing in something is better than believing in nothing, even if you don’t know what it is you believe in.” “I really don’t know what the hell I’m talking about, but yeah, that’s another way of putting it.” We shared a laugh over my extremely limited epiphany.

A cloud-busting kite became visible and for a while we tried to locate the person flying it, soon giving up. Then he appeared, a tubby chap in a tight seersucker suit just across the roof busily adjusting the string in maintaining such an impressive altitude for his kite. Gray Sleeveport rose without a word and slowly padded over to him and I watched the men speak, the kite flyer keeping his eyes upward for the most part as Gray pointed towards our table. Soon they were together coming towards me, the kite flyer following Gray while working his string. He was an unemployed chemical engineer by the name of Lidget who found a measure of serenity through his kites, and he seemed appreciative of Gray’s invitation to join us for some grub and wine. As it quickly became clear he required two hands to properly eat his food, we decided that I would control the kite during his meal. Lidget at first seemed amenable to this expedient as the only way he could truly ingest the food without the risk of choking or other such calamity. But when the moment came to transfer the spool of string to me he balked, refusing to release it from his grip. “Lidget, you could use a good meal, for crissakes, don’t be a fool,” Gray exhorted. “Relinquish the spool. You can trust Hargrove.” He only bristled with indignation, maundering about the bill of rights and the skyways belonging to “no mortal.” Finally, Sleeveport and I wrested the spool from him but Lidget proved to be deceptively rough-and-tumble and only through running away from him in a continuous rooftop “crazy-eight” circuit were we (I also controlled the kite during the chase) able to wear down the grossly overweight younger man. He collapsed, but came around soon enough where we figured it was nothing a good meal and a glass of wine couldn’t cure.

Here is when the real trouble began. While we had been clashing over the kite a small flock of seagulls had quietly descended onto the picnic area and were going to town on the victuals. Sleeveport blew his top and went haywire swinging his wooden box at the scavenging birds, who simply took to the air to plot their

counterattack. A groggy Lidget had risen to his feet by now and, expecting the sumptuous meal we promised, began shouting at us to bring him a plate. “Hold on, Lidget, can’t you see we have a gull imbroglio on our hands here?!” Gray yelled. “Gulls my ass, you old son of a bitch! You duped me!” Lidget croaked confusedly. The seagulls, six of them I counted, were hovering right over me when I recognized the big one from that morning at Tracy’s house, the leader with the menacing glare and long imposing beak, the one Tracy called Gordon, and now they soared straight up in a wedge formation and vanished towards the ocean only to soon reappear in the distance zooming back our way, though remaining very high and we knew their target—the kite—and try as I might to lower or move it around they could not be stopped from strafing and shredding it, flying their beaks and claws right through the paper. The tattered kite began its long drop and Lidget cursed the seagulls and shook his fist in anger as the wedge came diving down towards the roof again, for the picnic food we thought, not realizing they were first coming for us. We fled for the window once this was apparent and barely made it inside, Gray Sleeveport and me that is. Lidget, it turns out, was several paces behind us and they got him, pecking and biting his abundance of flesh with a maniacal vengeance before returning to their spoils at the picnic table. Gray and I went back out there to help their bloodied victim inside and called for an ambulance. Lidget was pretty bitten up and lacerated all right, but he would recover. I remember watching them for a moment from behind the chimney as they triumphantly devoured the picnic food, realizing these *were* the seagulls from my nightmares. They will stop at nothing to get what they want, or even to get you. Gordon once looked up from his feast and met my eyes with that deadly lower, the look of daggers bespeaking infinite patience and stamina in prevailing over my panicky dodges that only postpone the inevitable.

I ran, down the stairs and outside, and kept running until falling into a steady fast walk and thought everything through, the strange and macabre events that have followed me, the madness and fear that have taken over my life, and had to remember Klibble, knave that he was, and what he kept saying about the seagulls in my nightmares. That very night the doctor to whose care he had referred me, Gunther P. Stolonis, a renowned expert on seagulls and their pernicious affect on the human mind, was addressing a convention at the Great Auditorium in Ocean Grove. I had planned to attend mostly out of curiosity, but now I *had* to hear what this man had to say as a last measure to save myself. Now I felt seeing Dr. Stolonis was in many ways a matter of

survival. I had nowhere else to turn. I knew all this now striding through the narrow streets of the old shore town on my way to the liquor store, that I'd slid into the midst of an unutterable phantasmagoric crack in real time, uncharted and unknown. I bought a fifth of rye and sipped it while roaming the forlorn back roads of Ocean Grove, a wind beginning to kick up now as the clouds darkened and cast a firmament of dread over all. Steady reminders of doom seemed ineluctable as I kept moving, the fading, vacant buildings, a bald man in pantaloons playing mumblety-peg in an alley with a gonif sort of stripling, a wooden fence gate rattling back and forth in the wind with an old cat languidly atop it, and scattered throughout the impudent forms of solo seagulls, strutting and scavenging amid the barren remains of long gone summer. I could not help but feel that they knew who I was and relished the consternation they caused me by flying so near.

I swigged and sauntered over to the boardwalk and peered out over the ocean and the ominous sky, the waves crashing intermittently in aesthetic glory, and I thought of the Portuguese man of wars lurking in the dark deep waters. Horrid creatures who had sought to slaughter me, rend my form asunder in the most barbaric manner. In their possession I waited for the moment of obliteration and had no hope of survival. Believing yourself a goner ravages much of you whether you die or not. Waking ashore in the pre-dawn was a miraculous deliverance, a reprieve out of nowhere that left me suffused with thankfulness and a stalking fear of what I could not fathom. I had diminishing faith in the reality of the place I'd found myself in and would not succumb altogether to the salvos of aberration. Now, suddenly peckish, I found my way to a stool at Nagle's and ordered scrapple and buttered toast and eggs over easy and a cup of coffee. I tore ravenously into my food and after a minute I became aware of the short order cook, a middle-aged Asiatic fellow of slight build, stained white uniform, soda jerk cap, resting against the grill with arms crossed intently watching me. I nodded towards him and gesticulating with a forkful of scrapple I asked him: "Is there something I can help you with?" He shook his head and snickered lowly. "In my country, I own much land. Goats... sheep...yak. Family there too. *Here* I cook for you." He seemed like a decent, working man and I tried to follow his querying. "Yes, that is what happened. You cooked my food, being the cook here. But, it seems you are decrying the inherent unfairness of economics around the globe." He took a few steps towards me, narrowing his glare. "I did not cry." I shook my head. "No, you *decried* the salary inequities." Now he lunged towards me yelling: "I not cry! You hear? No

cry!” He was a few feet away and I realized if I uttered the word decry again—which he likely misconstrued as *did cry*—I would have been on the business end of the man’s maniacal assault. I simply nodded in acquiescence and returned to my meal as he slowly collected himself and retreated into the kitchen. This is the living sickness of the world today, I thought, that people are slain all the time over a misapprehension of even one word, or one look mistaken as a sneer, say, or a snicker. Weltschmerz, always an integral part of my Weltanschauung, welled up in me here.

I went back to The Albatross and lay on the bed in my room drinking rye, trying to relax until the lecture, when I fell asleep and had a nightmare of seagulls. In this one I was sitting at the counter again in Nagle’s enjoying my eggs when the cook, a large seagull in a white uniform and cap, began towards me carrying a bust of President James Garfield and the cook was exclaiming over and over “no cry” and then the Garfield bust began a speech about sangfroid and stiff upper lips before blubbering itself over being just a bust. When the exasperated cook started eating the bust I realized it was made of waffle cone and I asked the cook if he had a Warren Harding bust with black raspberry ice cream. “No, I most certainly do not. But come to think of it I would like one myself,” he replied. He called over several other large gulls in turtlenecks and sports jackets and enjoined them to bring back just such an order and we watched them fly away. I knew it was a mistake but I asked him for more coffee anyway and sure enough it sent him into a tizzy of violent fluttering before snatching me by the shirt in his beak and flying me out the door to the jetty in the ocean where his flock did a number on me. My eyes then opened and I sat up in bed and took a swig of rye and heard piano music faintly emanating from the parlor downstairs, ragtime music yet wistful and melancholy. I decided to see what was going on and found a man with a long beard, checked frock coat and corncob pipe at the keyboard and several couples in likewise period attire standing around listening. I asked them if they were staying at The Albatross and whether they were affiliated with the re-enactors I’d met the night before on the beach and they completely ignored me. Vexed, I soon found out why when they began singing, as apparently they were in a zone waiting for the piano player to warm up. And what beautiful antique songs they sang! *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, *Jim Crack Corn*, *Greensleeves*, *The Erie Canal*, and *It’s a Long, Long Way To Tipperary* are the numbers they harmonized in such flawless renditions bursting with nostalgic sentimentality. As soon as their little concert

ended, the thickset man wearing woolen knickers and garish argyle socks along with an Eton collar began pouring everyone glasses of champagne as they blithely exchanged pleasantries, nothing of which I could understand. They spoke in an affected, archaic aristocratic manner and seemed to regard me with revulsion. I nonetheless proffered them the ovation they deserved by clapping my hands and exclaiming “bravo” multiple times, which garnered their attention and plainly delighted them. A few of the men even playfully rendered bows, albeit the gaunt, cauliflower-eared fellow in spats, calico clamdiggers, and tuxedo jacket bowed concomitantly with the forward bend of the one they called Flodge, a doughy pale character in a pongee lime green suit and a yellow ascot, and the men conked skulls quite severely. Much agitation ensued among the other choristers, the thickset man in knickers launching a jeremiad about my “invasive listening and unsolicited provocative applause” which he believed was designed to “titillate our vainglory and incite such mayhem.” “I assure you,” I bristled, “my intentions in paying heed to your fine melodies are strictly honorable. Subverting your equanimity through encomiums would never occur to me.” The strange group offered no rejoinder, eschewing me once again by retreating to the far end of the parlor and I watched in puzzlement as they began addressing one another in quite dramatic fashion. “Oh, what a dreary day! If we only had known Mr. Chuttle was an embezzler,” the matronly woman in a frilly gown and foot-long brooch of a gravy boat sighed. Flodge now let out a grunt. “His escape is doomed. The tide is high and he will drown,” he predicted. The cauliflower-eared fellow moved towards a window and cried suddenly: “Uncle Otto is coming across the piazza! How proud and commanding he strides through the swarms! They don’t make men of his caliber anymore. He will know what we should do,” he exclaimed. “That is not Uncle Otto,” the thickset man declared. “Uncle Otto is dead. He was struck in the head by a foul ball batted from the sandlot on Linden Street and never recovered. You all were at the wake.” Flodge grunted and grumbled now. “Well, he looks like Uncle Otto,” he said, adding, “let’s ask him about Mr. Chuttle’s flight anyway.” “Your mind has attenuated since you blacked out on Shrovetide last. Now you utter such flummery, Reggie.” Very rapidly Flodge and the thickset man escalated their discord until they were circling one another with their fists stuck out like John L. Sullivan and everyone was crowded around them. I felt compelled to break it up and as I interceded between the pugilists I discovered by way of the group’s fierce indignation that they were rehearsing a play they would soon be staging. I tried to offer my apology but they seemed much more interested in deriding my misapprehension

with a spate of overwrought name-calling, which included among far worse and obscene, “knucklehead,” albeit this is the one they kept repeating and chuckling over and finally breaking into an impromptu ditty with the hook: *he never knows if he’s coming or going/instead/he’s simply misled/by his very own head/the knucklehead/our dear old knucklehead.*

I found the number quite rousing and infectious, and despite being the butt of their lampoon I could not help myself humming it as I bid them adieu, and failed to dislodge its nettlesome melody altogether from my mind for an interminable stretch. The stultifying lyrics were actually trilling from my lips as I strolled up the Ocean Parkway and sipped some rye, the Great Auditorium rising in the distance above the Victorian roofs and the tented bungalows, and I recollected that in a just a couple of hours now the lecture by Dr. Stolonian would commence. I meandered for a while, lost in reflection on the time-enchanted milieu around me, belts of rye boosting my fleeting insouciance. Few people were about in the grey waning afternoon, those who were seemed furtive and faraway and shrouded in re-enactor togs, whimsical with a hint of dark cabals. And I slugged down rye and suddenly stood gaping at the old-time water fountain in the center of an archaic magnificent gazebo, which I fondly remembered now, how my father would lead us there for its singular hydration replete with history, this symbol of Ocean Grove, this beloved fountain in its shelter called Beersheba, built in 1870, and I strode to it and drank its sparkling gush of cold delicious water. I was thirsty and its quenching cataract transported me into another time, and I was a boy again between innings at the ball field, under that giant oak guzzling from another old fountain, until someone called my name, *Hargrove! I see you’ve found Beersheba.*

And I straightened up and peered around and saw leaning against a tree in a jaunty cap and a jean jacket over a yellow dress, Tracy, and she was smiling when she met my eyes. She could not have looked lovelier, her blond bob shaggy falling over one eye, her arms crossed and one leg bent with her foot against the tree. “Yes,” I answered as I neared her, “I forgot all about Beersheba until it struck me just now. But I knew it well in the past.” “Are you sure?” she teased. “I hope not like we knew each other so well!” She laughed. “There’s only one Beersheba,” I said, “and only one Tracy, as far as I’m concerned.” I hugged her close and she chuckled and looked me in the eye. “You know, for an imposter you can be rather charming, Hargrove.” We kissed for a long time and right then she meant everything to me yet she could disappear again, I knew (but didn’t want to)

because she was of Ocean Grove and had its innate strangeness in her. She ran to the Beersheba fountain and frolicked around in a mock ceremony of her procession to quaff its magical water, and afterwards she raised her arms and proclaimed, "I have drank from the past and now the present tastes better." We saluted the old fountain and light-heartedly sauntered up the Ocean Pathway and though she found The Albatross "spooky in an appealing way" as we passed it, she declined my invitation to come to my room. She wanted to visit the beach and there we shared a few more laughs and my bottle of rye before she grew somewhat pensive and solicitous. "You're going to the lecture," she said. I nodded. "Do you want to come?" "They know you're going." "Who knows?" We were walking near the surf and she stopped and peered out over the ocean. "The seagulls. Gordon knows." I let out a snicker. "You can't be serious. He might be a nasty bird who's become attached to you, but he can't process such information." Tracy looked troubled as she met my eyes. "He knows. The seagulls fear the theories of Dr. Stoloniac will be accepted by the audience. If consensus builds for taking this man seriously, it would be devastating for them." Though her notions were nothing short of cockamamie, her earnestness tempered my response. That she believed the gulls understood who Stoloniac was and that she was capable of communicating on such a level with the likes of Gordon was not in doubt. I recognized that living year round in Ocean Grove for long periods could have such an effect on people. So I went along with her postulate in trying to help solve her seagull concerns, inasmuch as we certainly shared baleful entanglements with the seagull populace. "I've suffered too many nightmares about them not to at least hear what this Dr. Stoloniac has to say about such maladies. I wish you would come with me."

She took a sip of rye and looked up as a large wedge of low-flying gulls soared over us from the boardwalk, continuing over the ocean and squawking in shrill cries as they circled back our way and beyond. Gordon was in the lead and Tracy waved impassively. "I am going," she said, "and Gordon and his buddies will be there too." "Gordon and his flock attacked me and two others on a rooftop earlier today. They ripped apart one of us, wounded him badly." Tracy moved towards the surf and splashed some foam onto her face. She faced down and shook her head. "I know. I'm very sorry, Hargrove. He can be jealous like that. He is under enormous strain with so much threatening their existence. But nothing excuses that kind of violence." "Jealous? Are you saying because he saw us in your bed together his grudge was such that he tried to take me

out?” She held her face in her hand before searching my eyes for several moments, unable, it seemed, to find the words. She then stepped back and grasped the bottle of rye for a swig and said with urgency: “Stolonic and his acolytes know you are attending the lecture and they plan to exploit your personal anguish, imputed to seagulls, to advance his draconian bloodthirsty solution. Hargrove, they want to unleash a hunting season of slaughter, and if that doesn’t wipe out seagulls sufficiently, then the toxic spraying will finish them off. Stolonic is a malevolent force who wants to seize an opportunity in using your desperation to heal to destroy an entire generation of seagulls, maybe even wipe them off the face of the earth. You must help us stop him, Hargrove. We need you.”

Now I needed a stiff belt of rye. She looked more beautiful when caught up in impassioned imperativeness, and how could I not join her noble cause and stand up for the gulls? Of course, her divulgences seemed to grow nuttier by the minute and I wondered whether a pharmaceutical was at work in her system, or perhaps more of the dope we smoked the previous night on the beach. I thought I’d lend my support and be there for her during whatever it was she feared. “And how do you know this? That Stolonic expects my attendance and will exploit me?” I knew what she was going to say, whom she’d cite as her unimpeachable source, but I wanted to hear how she’d say it. “Gordon,” she answered simply. “He told me. A lot is riding on how you handle it, Hargrove.” “And how did he find out?” “When there is a plot against you—to destroy you—you make it your business to know what they are up to.” I hesitated in posing the next question, fearing an agitated recoil, but my curiosity to hear her explication proved too strong: “So how exactly does Gordon communicate with you?” I lofted to her like an amused grandfather indulging his granddaughter’s world of fairies and pixies. “You could never understand,” she snapped. “What matters is you must refute the barbarity of Stolonic’s ideas. He cannot scapegoat the seagulls!” She moved close to me and I held her in my arms as the waves crashed in whitecap suds before us, and I told her I would do as she bade me. We walked along the surf holding hands and I felt very connected to her and then the wedge of gulls came from the boardwalk flying over us towards the jetty and the squawks struck me as more sanguine and pleased as Tracy signaled some high sign to Gordon, his broad, commanding form leading their way. I found her strange attachment to him now poignant and whimsical and, most importantly, only tenuously linked to my own budding relationship with her. After they disappeared, I

brought her close to me and we kissed and soon dropped to the surf and kissed more beside the white lapping of waves until Tracy seemed to catch herself before going any further. She splashed me and scrambled to her feet laughing, and as I rose she was already hastening away. “Where are you going?” I called after her. “I’ll see you at the lecture,” she yelled. “We’re counting on you, Hargrove.” I drank some more rye and remained on the beach thinking about her and how much I wanted her to be mine and that after the lecture I’d take her over to Nagle’s and then for a drink somewhere.

By the time I emerged back on the boardwalk I could see people moving down the Ocean Pathway towards the Great Auditorium, many with long beards and 19th Century three-piece suits and watch fobs they checked and pipes they puffed. Many women also wore costumes of long dresses and petticoats and bonnets with flowers. Others making their way towards the lecture seemed more postwar 40’s and 50’s in gray flannel suits and felt hats and painted ladies in cocktail dresses. Then there were the revivalist folks from the tents and bungalows in simple work clothes and straw hats and the women in white mother hubbards, singing soothing canticles as they too undertook the pilgrimage to the Auditorium. Liqueured up innocuous tramps found each other and emerged from alleys and empty lots to zigzag their devil-may-care ways in the direction the procession of everyone else was headed. A group of working men in overalls covered in grease seemed to come right from a job site to march down the Pathway. A bunch of rambunctious kids ran wild through it all, some with baseball mitts and balls and a few with fishing rods, chasing one another towards the Auditorium in some mysterious contest. Old-timers, slow and sober, crept along the same way with rectitude and inexorable will to hear out the latest lecturer who’s come to town. A stout bearded man in top hat and vintage pin-striped suit, identified by several onlookers as the mayor of Ocean Grove, proceeded with his delegation amidst the march, waving now and then to townsfolk. As I neared the grand entrance to the building the massive bells of the old steeple church began to toll and an organ sounded its insistent staccato low notes. There was a palpable excitement afoot, a lurking tension too, a sense something profound and unforgettable would touch those in attendance that night.

I paid for my ticket and soon stood inside the magnificent structure from another era that inspired awe in numerous ways, and I saw the gathering clouds of cigar and pipe smoke float up and hover by the rafters.

There, high above perched on shadowy beams, my eye caught sight of several seagulls who'd crashed the event and found their own seats, and fluttery avian movements in the elevated purlieus adumbrated more gulls were in attendance. As the crowd filed in vendors waded among them, hawking a variety of snacks such as peanuts, popcorn, red hots, salt-water taffy, ice cream and cotton candy. They were a motley bunch, aggressive in their barking and attired in loud red-and-white striped suits. The captivating band of somber musicians I came across on the boardwalk in the early morning mists now appeared on stage playing their singular brand of melancholy inquisitions. A white-bearded fellow on stilts in an Uncle Sam outfit stood near the back intermittently waving and bellowing incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo into a bullhorn. When I looked up again and noticed more seagulls, phalanxes of them, lining the high timbers I spotted the larger, magisterial form of Gordon now alighted among them. He stood tall and straight with his wings somewhat raised and his beak jutting high, a proud, cunning chief prepared to take measure of his enemy and lead his flocks accordingly, maximizing their air superiority if necessary. Such is how his posture struck me as I remained transfixed by his presence, and he slued his gaze my way and we met eyes for several seconds before the strident, lugubrious passage the band had been playing suddenly ended and the lighting in the great hall began to dim. I thought I would find Tracy and we'd sit together but now that seemed impossible with the darkening arena and I was disappointed, though knew she was present.

Soon we all sat in pitch-dark silence until the faint sounds of a brass marching band came over the loudspeakers, stirring archaic martial music that could have been a Prussian parade, and it built up in a crescendo and several spotlights shone over the crowd towards the entrance doors. Then a figure appeared at the foot of the center aisle, a substantial silhouette of a man in a long cloak and homburg hat, bearded amply over his chest, and the marching music rose to a booming volume and the figure proceeded alone up the aisle towards the stage and at about one-third of his way the lights illuminated him in stunning theatricality. At that moment, Dr. Gunther P. Stolonik paused and thrust his hands high in the air and surveyed the packed house, and the psychiatrists, representing the majority group in attendance, broke into wild applause, many leaping to their feet. As he neared the stage the music shifted into a steady, warlike drum-beating and he sprung up the steps with a surprising flourish to shake the outstretched hand of the grinning, bespectacled, bald man in a black

suit who had just announced the lecturer's name to the assemblage. It was clear by the reception he received already that no introduction was necessary. The crowd knew who Stolonich was and understood the threat he was there to warn everyone about.

He stood expressionless at the podium until the thunderous ovation receded into silence and waited a long space, no doubt for effect, before beginning. "Thank you, Ocean Grove. Thank you, fellow healers of the mind. And everyone else here tonight who understands the menace in our midst that is spreading and destroying life as we know it. I have studied the seagull and the consequences and sequellae of their ever presence in our ecosystem for over forty years... and ladies and gentlemen, I have reached one unavoidable, unequivocal conclusion. The human race cannot coexist any longer with the seagull. We must act now to end the widespread havoc, mayhem, and disease caused by this bird." The band struck up a bleak, sepulchral piece as a massive screen behind Stolonich on stage lit up with unsettling imagery of seagulls engaged in their all-out war with people. Here were squadrons of gulls dive-bombing at forty mph to attack unsuspecting beachgoers, al fresco diners, and even children eating ice cream cones with beaks and claws ripping flesh and letting blood flow. Lurid and depraved, the vicious predators shown on screen quite simply were wanton annihilators without any redeeming qualities whatsoever. The soaring seagull high over the ocean always had its place as an enduring part of sea shore aesthetics and symbol of inspiration and freedom. Stolonich's film of gulls swooping down to terrorize and rend asunder innocent people scuttled that myth, as all we see is them collaborating strategically in distracting folks before snatching their food and leaving bloodied victims. We see them in flocks of thuggish, swaggering birds stalking people sunbathing or children building sandcastles, becoming more and more aggressive while growing larger every year, until now they often seem like dirty, rogue hawks. We hear the dire voice of Dr. Stolonich booming over the disturbing footage: "Their numbers are rapidly multiplying, soon there will be six gulls per human being in Europe and North America, worse in third world countries. They are increasing in size at a rate of an inch in wingspan every year, and in twenty years will be the equivalent of coyotes with wings." The film now ended, freezing on a close-up of a gull appearing particularly malevolent and Stolonich paused to gaze upon the miscreant before continuing: "They work in teams and are extremely clever and tactical in their raids. They can live and breed for up to forty years and it is their protective instinct

towards their young which makes them so aggressive. In short, they would simply wipe us all out if they could, and unless we kill them now they will one day not very far off overwhelm us and precipitate our demise.”

It was a hypnotic condemnation that traded in fear and loathing and would not accept anything short of utter slaughter and extinction. There was desperation in the man’s urgency, conviction and will in the manner of his delivery, and an avalanche of buttressing studies and scientific reports, slides, graphs, charts, and alarming statistics. He spoke authoritatively on the infectious diseases they carry that can affect people through contact with their faeces, and their central role in spreading “superbug” bacteria that have developed resistance to antibiotics. But just when the nameless horrors of seagulls seemed more deadly and demonic than the worst monsters imaginable, Stolonic began to talk about their insidious harming and twisting of the human mind. “The wiring of our brains is remarkably susceptible to the virulent, ruinous presence of seagulls. Their very ominous, menacing ways alone are enough to damage one’s cognitive function over time, infuriating and frightening the victim into a disassociated retreat from reality. The flap of wings in the darkness, the deadly stare behind the bumptiously thrust beak, the flutter of feathers in the lurking recesses signaling vile terrors to come, all part of the incessant haunting intimidation they bring is enough in itself to adversely affect one’s grasp of reality. They quite simply take their toll on people, especially those who reside in coastal areas where gulls tend to congregate, leaving those exposed to them for years often unbalanced and traumatized in the most delirious of breakdowns.” Now there was stark silence as the screen showed faces of the insane, one after another every few seconds, often in seashore settings with lost, dead eyes and distorted grimaces, haunted visages of suffering driven from reality by the sick avian predators whose evil was well documented. I was dazed and dumbfounded by the sheer power and breadth of the broadside, and the crowd, while earlier sympathetic to Stolonic’s message, now seemed overwhelmed by the scope of the horrors and the radical resolution the man recommended. It was all too much for intelligent sensibilities to process at once, and by the anxious murmuring and agitated ripples of susurrations it was apparent no one was prepared to hear such a severe sermon of devastation, despair, and extermination.

Amidst this welter of rattled consternation, Stolonic commenced speaking in measured solicitous pronouncements which sought to personalize and localize the threat we all faced, and he soon began describing

the deplorable, heart-wrenching case of an “individual amongst us today, right here in this auditorium, a poor soul who’s nearly been defeated by the constant torment of nefarious gulls, and will be soon, unless we institute our program in time.” Whispers and mutterings accompanied the audience’s frayed search amongst themselves, all mystified to this desperate individual’s identity, and I, of course, knew him well—but could not act. As Stolonius called for the “afflicted soul to come forward and inform this fine assemblage of his tortured struggle,” I quailed and remained in my seat, daunted by the formidable challenge the gulls of Stolonius’s vision posed vis-à-vis my desire for Tracy and pledge to her to do all I can to subvert the man’s mission of massacre. I looked around for Tracy amidst the roiling rows of spectators and as I turned my gaze upward towards the rafters I saw the mass of gulls had swelled even more and they were all atwitter with apparent uneasiness. Then Gordon, stock-still, beak jutted high with contempt, shifted slightly and met my eyes until I had to avert them. He had implored me in his way to help their cause. I knew I loved her too much not to rise and take on Stolonius, and I actually commiserated now with the plight of Gordon and his flock. I rose from my chair and bellowed so all could hear my self-identification: “I am that *afflicted soul* you speak of! I am the one haunted by chimerical seagulls, grotesque merciless dive-bombers of my nightmares! I come sent by Klibble, Dr. Casper Klibble, who could not help me...who I came to loathe, who said only you had answers.” All eyes were riveted upon me and when I finished there was but dead silence as I began my way through the row to the aisle, and before turning towards the stage I glanced to the rear of the great hall because I sensed her presence, unobtrusively standing against the shadowed wall, the woman I wanted now more than anything, and we looked into each others’ eyes for a second and I knew we were in love.

I began towards the great man waiting for me on the stage, he of the long beard and sonorous voice and scorched earth policy that would purportedly save me and many others from plummeting into the abyss, the naturalist who spread the sense of doom, only decrying the dark side of nature and what needed to be obliterated. I felt the hard gazes of the psychiatrists on me, the murmurings and restlessness among the various factions. Some were looking upward and pointing with ugly delirious wrath towards the throng of gulls covering the rafters. One overwrought shrink in bow tie and double-breasted olive pongee suit and handlebar mustache stood on his chair and shook his fist at the birds. “Your reign of terror is up, you sordid hooligans.

You're running out of time!" he yelled. A ripple of such taunts echoed his and tension and turbulence filled the arena, and halfway to the stage I noticed Stolonian motion to the band seated front left and they struck up a contemplative number, spirited in a steady, gathering way, drowning out the calls of acrimony in the seats. I finally bounded up the steps to shake Stolonian's hand and felt his powerful clasp and now got a sense of the man in my immediate presence. He was large, substantial, a striking figure whose presence mitigated those around him, especially me, and he had that aberrant, inscrutable glint in his eyes that betokened the fever of his campaign. He had a broad, prominent nose and oiled cropped hair and wore a dark antique suit, the homburg and cape set aside. Mostly, though, it was those penetrating, cunning eyes I could not avoid, like a police car with the spotlight on me, and the beard, the long dusky appendage of whiskers, like an animal clung to his neck. He sized me up now as I stood beside him, his head tilted as if that offered a better view, and I looked out over the cavernous hall and the intense faces, all with their expectations, and tried to find her out there to no avail. The band had stopped playing now and stark silence settled uncomfortably over everything as Stolonian hung fire on his opening question, apparently relishing the sweaty unease growing in me. "Son, you have been through a calamitous ordeal and here you stand before us all today, not altogether lost, but alive and salvageable." His thunderous voice reminded me of an old-time Southern politician, a searing preacher even, fulminating with warnings, a powerful presence who adopted a paternal tone towards me now. "Unburden the sorrow and anguish you wear so heavily in your heart, son. The avian enemies of the skies traumatized you early and made sure you never recovered from that boyhood incident. I want you to tell us the devastating story of that attack." I had no answer except the truth, which was that I had no such memory of being attacked by seagulls as a boy. A palpable gasp passed through the crowd as Stolonian, annoyed by my demurral, signaled for a video to appear on the big screen, the lights dimmed and here was more eminently bogus footage of me supposedly as a boy on the beach with my family at Ocean Grove. The audience watched the brief scenes of actors on fake vintage super 8 film: the young boy playing me rides a wave into the surf and picks up a starfish and several enormous seagulls dive-bomb him from the sky, biting and clawing him into bloody unconsciousness. Some in the crowd shrieked at the lurid brutality of the attack, albeit the final shot of the displaced starfish vibrating on the voluminous kinetic flab of a sunbather's belly elicited a smattering of chuckles.

When the lights returned Stolonich had moved closer to me, and stood with his arms folded across his chest smiling benevolently at me. “Son, the camera does not lie. Your life forever changed that day on the beach. Your body was wounded but it would heal; your mind, however, took it much worse. The damage was permanent, the *compos mentis* apparatus broken, shattered, never again to fully grasp the notion of reality again.” “That was not me or my family in that film. It was an obvious fraud made by mysterious, fiendish forces for some dark unknown end. I am utterly stupefied by its appearance,” I bristled in response. The crowd churned in ruffles of disquiet. Now Stolonich placed his meaty large hand upon my shoulder and smiled and said with the compassion of a tyrant pardoning a condemned prisoner: “My goodness, Graham, we have to wean you from such refractory denial. Acceptance is the first step towards healing.” The shrinks in attendance nodded and voiced murmurs of affirmation. “My mind is not broken, doctor. I have complete cognizance of the world around me, and have no recollection of being the victim of any such gull attack.” “Liar!!” a frantic shout rose from the auditorium. I addressed the heckler and crowd directly: “For what purpose would I shy from the truth, sir?! I readily acknowledge an abiding fear, even terror, of the seagull and its predatory patrol of the skies. And the gull I fear most resides in my nightmares, stalking my sleep ruthlessly. But the contrivance of the boyhood trauma and the irrevocable harm to my psyche is nothing but a necessary cog in the cabal that appears under way.” Cries and gasps filled the air and Stolonich’s grandiloquent grin permuted into a fleeting grimace. “Graham, it is admirable that you admit to this debilitating fear of the gull,” he said, fast recovering his paternal tone, “but the cognition you attest to is more a matter of debate.” “My faculties are quite sound, sir!” I bridled. Stolonich paced around me, his hand on chin and gaze upward in apparent reflection, before he asked in rhetorical resonant voice: “Yes, Graham, don’t we all want to believe in our capacity to perceive life as it actually is? Anything less is terrifying even to contemplate. But there comes a time when the empirical evidence otherwise speaks too loudly for one to persistently ignore.” He took a few more steps and theatrically pivoted and pointed at me with the question: “What would your son have to say about all this seagull business?” Of course, the loaded introduction of my grievous, harrowing last visit with my ex-family left me in a tongue-tied pique. “I don’t see the point of your question!” I finally snapped. “Nothing is immaterial in trying to fathom the downward spiral of a man who once showed so much promise. Ladies and gentlemen, Graham was once a first-rate designer of wallpaper prints for a major department store. But his eye for the contemporary

wall waned and his talent for his craft deserted him, until he had to take a leave of absence from his job. The fear grew too big inside to control any more, isn't that correct, Graham? And who visited upon you this dread, this nameless horror, such unutterable fear so relentlessly? Please tell us, Graham!" I threw my arms up and said: "You're attempting to impute all my fear and despair and inevitable decline to the gulls, and you have to know it is much more than them. I never cared as much as I should have about wallpaper design. In fact, it was maddening in that it allowed me to work in an art-related capacity but I might as well been toiling in a sheet metal shop." Stolon's eyes grew bigger as he seemed quite pleased. "Now we are getting somewhere, Graham! So do tell us, what would have been your preferred calling?" "The transitory times I was fortunate enough to work on my art were probably the most fulfilling experiences of my life."

As I spoke it occurred to me, sadly, the epiphany I had earlier on the beach about accepting the failure of my meager career in art and moving on with my life. Stolon stood in front of me now and grasped my shoulders in each of his hands, scouring my eyes for insight into my lost apotheosis. "You were destined to make great works of art, Graham. I do not make such pronouncements lightly. I can tell by the way a man describes his work, which you did with such elan." He paused now, turned, and pointed with his entire arm in the upward direction of the still swelling numbers of gulls in the rafters and all eyes looked up there. "But they snuffed it out of you! *They* caused you to quit with inexorable fear ravaging your soul, spreading through your body like a fungus rotting your soft tissues and ligaments and organs." The crowd became rowdier, frantic with anger in shaking their fists aloft, and I began to ponder the possibility of Stolon having it right about the seagulls, maybe they had intimidated me enough to render me useless and broken a long time ago. Maybe all the dread and doom meted out by the gulls, their darkening menace ever lurking in lonely shadows, the plague of nightmares in which they terrorized and savaged me all added up to *evil*, that they really are our arch-enemies, relentless banes of humanity. Stolon now padded to the lip of the stage and once again dramatically thrust his arm towards the rafters and pointed his finger at the gulls on the beams. "I know you for what you are! Fiends! Devils! Murderous miscreants! Your war against people is over! I condemn the seagull to death!" The audience erupted in pandemonium and bloodthirsty cries for retribution, many standing on their chairs and shaking fists with violent threats. The gulls, an endless cloud of white and gray feathers stretching high over

everyone, were visibly agitated with feathers aflutter and beaks screeching with a cacophony of incensed caws. And I saw them now as the crowd did, vicious, vile predators who cause much harm and cast a firmament of gloom over all people, and it was high time something was done to stop them. In that moment I hated them more than I ever hated anything because I began to believe that they indeed were responsible for subverting all my hopes and aspirations, and all this time I'd been blaming myself. I was about to raise my angry fist at them like the others when my eyes caught sight of Tracy standing against the wall to the right side of the auditorium and met her beautiful, supplicant eyes. She appeared frightened, distressed, and she now gazed up at the gulls and seemed to be gesticulating and calling out frenetically to her beleaguered pals. I had promised I would help them and she was waiting for my follow-through, I knew. In those seconds of my deliberation only one factor mattered in my decision. I had fallen in love with Tracy and I could not bear losing my chance with her. And then the new revelation came to me about the dark seagull mystery as the conflict escalated with Stolonian mad and histrionic in his full-throated denunciation and threats of death whipping up the crowd more and more and now a number of the birds were flying around the auditorium at blinding speeds and swooping low towards their tormentors, forcing many to cover their heads and hit the deck.

Seagulls can be scary and destructive creatures, I thought, *but the fear they embody is more important to conquer than decimating their entrenched flocks along coastlines everywhere.* I noticed the 40's classic stand-up microphone behind us on stage which Stolonian had used initially to deliver his remarks and dashed towards it, and with full amplification I began to address an audience now embroiled in a terrible chaotic clash. As my loud resonant voice beseeched them for attention the crowd by degrees turned towards the stage again, and even Stolonian, though the last to do so, quit his scathing tub thumper to cast his raging gaze my way. "We all have fears, every one of us in this auditorium," I began diffidently, "but no one can live in fear, for that is a slow death." I paused to gather my words and there were murmurs and rumblings among the crowd at my opening line, uncertain of my stance. "We must overcome our fears to lead healthy, productive lives." I saw Stolonian nodding now, along with many others, no doubt construing my speech so far as pro gull extermination. "How we respond to our fears defines us as individuals and as a people. We must conquer them and move past them, but killing that which we are afraid of is heinous and barbaric and anathema to the principles of democratic

civilization. Seagulls, for some, including myself, are fear incarnate. You know my story, gulls brought me to my knees--but I had to face this fear or perish. And I'm grateful to them because now my fear is lifting. I still see the menace in their soaring wedges, but also the beauty and majesty and freedom they represent so well." The crowd had quieted considerably and I could tell they were listening intently, while Stolonian smoldered. "I once had ambition and hope to become an artist, and great disappointment followed when this never happened. But there is a line from a poem by Arthur Clough worth remembering: *If our hopes were dupes, our fears may be liars*. Don't annihilate the seagull, look them in the eye and hang tough and you'll find out some truths about yourselves. About what matters and that love can save you." I hesitated, struggling for my closing words. "Tracy, I'm talking about you."

A long stark silence ensued and I remained stock-still at the microphone, scanning the audience for her to no avail until someone began clapping, slowly but steadily, and I saw it was Tracy standing by the far wall, smiling at me assuredly, and then another commenced clapping, a bearded shrink with a monocle in a plaid suit and wearing a tarboosh on his crown, and then another started clapping and rose and momentum swept through until nearly everyone in the building had joined the standing ovation, and they applauded for the longest time as I said thank you several times. And that's when Stolonian, now with his entourage of staunch supporters beside him on the stage, drew a pistol—a large antique derringer—from his coat and took aim at the legions of seagulls amassed upon the rafters, shouted "You will die winged devils! I am your executioner!" and fired four shots, leaving billows of smoke. Instinctually, I bolted across the stage to tackle the burly doctor and my fury was such that I not only took him down but just about had him knocked him out—until his equally brawny acolytes pulled me off him and went to work on me. Complete delirium and utter bedlam took over the crowd as everyone scrambled for cover when the shots rang out, and soon after fights broke out amid a stampede for the doors. The seagulls were flying all over and squawking hysterically, though none were hit by the gunfire. Stolonian's goons were stomping me and may have killed me if the great wedge of gulls had not swept over my attackers and dive-bombed them into bloody semiconscious wrecks. The groggy flailing Stolonian was strafed into a sanguinary crazy quilt of blood and rent flesh. It was the noble and proud Gordon who fluttered upon my lap after I sat up and he was a few inches from my face staring into my eyes as he seemed to nod at me.

“Thank you,” I heard myself say, before he began to fly away, applying his right claw softly to my head in the movement, perhaps a pat, and the others in his flock then followed him through the arena and outside. Slowly I picked myself up, felt the battered parts of my body but knew I could move around all right.

I made my way off the stage and saw no sign of Tracy, only some shrinks and locals still mixing it up in various pockets around the seats and aisles. I plodded to the nearest exit and breathed some fresh air and the sirens were loud outside, the police would be there any second now as I made my way up the Ocean pathway towards the beach. On the boardwalk I was alone peering out into the night sky covering mysterious dark ocean and its rumble of lurking dangers within. I went down to the surf and thought about Tracy and worried what may have happened to her. As I strolled along they came from over the ocean, several dozen seagulls gliding in the moonlight and they flew in front of me, hovering in their wedge around my eye level, the open end of the wedge closest to me. So I walked into the narrowing sides, nodding at the gulls as I passed them as if they were a troop and soon coming to the one large commander gull waiting at the end of the procession. It was Gordon, floating effortlessly, his beak jutting imperiously. When I reached him we stared into one another's eyes for a while and then he spread his wings all the way, and I began to wonder that this was about more than mutual gratitude before he gently placed both claws on my head and soared back over the ocean, and one by one every seagull did the exact same ritual before following their boss over the dark waves.

I trudged back to the Albatross and started hitting my bottle of rye while coming to the conclusion sleep would not come that night nor many nights until I saw Tracy. So I took my rye and began walking to her bungalow, the police lights and activity still evident from over at Great Auditorium. It was a nice cool evening with a slight breeze and I savored the barren solitude to get my head right after so much Sturm and Drang at the lecture. The dim upstairs light was on and I thought it best to just go up. The door was open as usual, and I soundlessly climbed the stairs and tiptoed my way towards her room, where I could now hear her voice faintly through her bedroom door, only slightly ajar. I could not restrain myself from peeping inside, inchmeal widening the aperture until a visual of Tracy in bed accompanied the tones of her voice and soft laughter. She was utterly engrossed in her blithe diversions under the covers of her bed and did not notice me as I entered the room and moved closer to her. She was talking to herself lowly, delightedly, wearing a very contented smile

along with the occasional giggle, and I thought it was a byproduct of the awful stress and strain of the day. She had been through so much and now it was over and I wanted to be with her and love her, and I found myself leaning over to surprise her with a kiss—*when something nameless, unbearably shocking shook me to my very core.* Startled by my presence, Tracy gasped and recoiled and the covers came undone and there underneath with his beak still planted inside her was none other than the valiant leader of Ocean Grove’s seagulls, the brave gull who guided my rescue from Stolonis’s forces, here was Gordon *in flagrante delicto* with the woman I had come to love and hoped to spend the rest of my life with. There were no words, any formal communication would be absurd in such a severe imbroglio. We just stared at one another, Tracy and I, unable to move or speak, as Gordon disengaged from her and looked at us with a wet beak and reddened eyes squinting in the light. And I left the room right then, left the two of them in that bed and raced down the stairs and outside into the salt air and headed towards the boardwalk and the beach, where Tracy caught up to me.

I was standing in the surf, the ocean waves lapping my shoes, when I heard her shouting my name from a good distance and waited for her. I still had no words for her, but she wanted to tell me something very badly and we went for a long walk along the surf. “Have you ever heard of metempsychosis?” she began. I shook my head and that began her fantastical but somehow plausible story of her marriage to a good man she loved very much who died of colon cancer eleven years ago and left her devastated, and how before he passed away he swore if there was a way to return from the other side he would come back to her, and she forgot about that in her throes of grief, which she sought to escape by dropping out and moving to Ocean Grove. That is, until one day a seagull landed on her blanket at the beach and stayed there all that afternoon and followed her home and kept returning and over time convinced her that it contained the transmigrated soul of her late husband, Gordon Burgess. “You’re the only person I told this to, Hargrove,” she said. “I know what you must be thinking. But it’s him. I’ve always been a no-nonsense realist, but this is true.” We had stopped near a jetty and some gulls squawked in the distance, as the rough tide pounded the surf. “How do you know for sure?” I asked. “He can’t process much language, but he *found* me and his intelligence, the foods he loves, the music, the paintings, his love of fireworks, hundreds of little things I can show you make it unmistakable,” she insisted. “I’m telling you, Hargrove, because I have real feelings for you and I know you do for me and I want to be with you but I can’t.

The other day I wanted to make love with you in my bed, but with him perched at the window I couldn't. And I haven't been with a man in a long time and I believe Gordon would have been fine with it, knowing he would want what's best for me. But I couldn't do it and that will not change." She became very emotional with tears and we hugged and I told her I understood, but no one can really understand such a story. I did feel very sorry for her, knowing the profound pain grieving people experience. Maybe this was her way, an exceedingly unorthodox way, of dealing with the sorrow of her loss. The gull certainly brought comfort to Tracy, and she was quite gratified to tell me seagulls can live up to forty years. "Gordon could outlive me," she noted. I promised to keep her secret between us.

As I thought about it more it occurred to me there was no real way I could prove that the spirit of her husband *had not* passed into the form of this seagull in New Jersey. As I stated earlier, how much do we really know about one another, who we are deep down, people or animals, living creatures? Not all that much. We hardly know ourselves, for crying out loud. And I will say this, as I never left Ocean Grove and have lived a quiet contemplative life here since, Tracy and Gordon are among my closest friends and I have never seen a seagull as intuitive and intelligent and, quite frankly, *human* in his approach to life, and I have come to believe that he just might carry the soul of Gordon Burgess. Listening to jazz records on the porch, sipping single malts and barbecuing, I look at him and can only wonder. Or maybe not, but who knows? Maybe that's what a place like Ocean Grove does to you, makes you wonder about such things. And that would be one reason I am here. As one of the damaged people who have made the place my home, I am grateful. Ocean Grove is somewhere between the reality we left and fantasy lands that do not exist, it lies in an otherworldly penumbra all of its own. I have my own bungalow now, catch odd jobs now and then, hang out with my buddies like Gray Sleeveport and Cyril Lidget, and I'm pretty much a regular on the beach at night for bonfires with the others who've been lost or down or troubled until they found each other here, and occasionally I'll even join my phantasmagoric pals who are some kind of re-enactors (though no one can figure them out), for the world of song, history and whimsy they seem to inhabit, and there's no concert like the one our band plays in the pre-dawn hours on the boardwalk. That's my life here in Ocean Grove and I am content. *If our hopes were dupes, our fears may be liars.* Read it a long time ago and it stuck in my head for some reason. Maybe I knew I'd need it one day to come to

grips with life. I never thought I'd wind up here and be some kind of hero to the seagulls, who are left alone these days. When Gordon leads a great wedge out over the ocean and the whitecaps are breaking and the late afternoon sun is just right, one cannot but feel good and treasure what is truly magnificent.

THE END