

THE SEAGULL
by George Malko

Johnny Luddin's father arrived on campus unexpectedly. "How do you want me to introduce you?" Johnny asked. He wished his father had called to let him know he was coming; he wished he felt happier to see his father. He felt guilty that he didn't.

Pyotr Mikhailovitch misunderstood. "Introduce me?" he said in a tone of polite amusement. "To whom?" But Johnny's question was very sensible. His father's fragile Hollywood film-writing career had included a professional change of name. An agent had almost taken an oath in blood that it would help Johnny's father get work. Pyotr Mikhailovitch Ludinëv had settled on Peter M. Luddin. "Scots," he had explained to his appalled wife. "Something that is also called Caledonian." Johnny remember how impressed his father had seemed, as if revived by the potential of a fresh self, the promises of possibility. "Maybe Welsh, too. *Vanya*, you are now John Luddin." When Johnny's mother protested, Pyotr Mikhailovitch had an answer ready for her. "What, after all, is in a name?" he had rationalized cheerfully, always so reasonable, so flexible.

"Luddin or *Ludinëv*," Johnny said to his father. All he wanted to know was with whom he was dealing. The feeling of being perplexed by this made a tingle of familiar embarrassment scurry lightly across the back of his neck.

"*Ludinëv*," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said with no hesitation. "Unless of course explanations will later make something awkward for you." He was on his way to Boston. A Harvard professor had invited him to shed new light on the early years of Russian film.

"I'll just introduce you as my father," Johnny decided. "Let them figure it out."

"Good," Pyotr Mikhailovitch agreed. "I am only here for two days. How many people will I meet?"

He had taken a room for himself at College Hall Inn, the town's lone hotel, an imposing old four-story wooden structure on College Avenue. Climbing the stairs because there was no elevator, he asked how school was. "All right," Johnny said. "Fine." Only eight weeks into his first year of college and feeling very unsettled, Johnny realized he owed his father something more concrete. "I'm reading *The Seagull*. For Freshman Humanities."

Pyotr Mikhailovitch paused on a landing and turned to look the couple of steps back down to where his son had also stopped. "Do you like it?"

"It's slow."

Pyotr Mikhailovitch turned to continue up the stairs. "How is the translation?" he asked over his shoulder. Johnny gave a shrug which his father seemed to hear. "I see," he said.

At the room, Pyotr Mikhailovitch pushed open the heavy polished oak door with one hand and extended the other, palm up. "Not uncomfortable," he said, introducing his quarters. No suitcase was in sight. Johnny knew his father had already completely unpacked. The air in the room, musty, streaked with a hint of some sort of a cleanser, now also suggested the vaguely familiar. There was the sense of Pyotr Mikhailovitch Ludinev's presence; he had worked his casual alchemy and actually *moved* in. Johnny saw his father's soft leather slippers resting cozily under the bed, worn toes poking out. In the bathroom, on the narrow milk-glass shelf above the wash basin, Johnny found his father's shaving things, the strange and clumsy English-made Rolls razor. When its oblong lid was raised, it exposed the razor's blade; the blade was attached to a handle which moved back and forth with a rickety clatter when the blade was sharpened. Pyotr Mikhailovitch's shaving brush was next to the razor, a worn boar-bristle one from Milan. The shaving soap was a

dented tube of Barbasol, flopped on his father's wrinkled old toilet kit. There were no hair brushes. Just—Johnny touched the pliant leather to confirm it was inside the worn kit--the bottle of Coffelt's, a pale whitish fluid Pyotr Mikhailovitch used irregularly to take the gray out of his thinning hair.

Johnny came out of the bathroom to hear his father say, "It almost has style." He was fingering a turned-back corner of the old lemon-yellow bed cover whose tasseled fringe hung unevenly along the bed's sides and foot. "Like something backstage in the provinces. The bed!" he called out, raising a finger with which he then directed the bed past him out onto a nearby stage. "The *chaise longue*!" The same gesture. "*Tabouretka*!" Again, the upraised finger signaled and then made a quick little wave sideways, to the waiting stage. "So useful to have it. When the *portier* drinks too much he sleeps on it, and then astonishes everyone by requesting a separate payment for his duties as night watchman."

"Will you be able to sleep on it?"

"Certainly. If not—," Pyotr Mikhailovitch's hand touched the several books lying on the oval bedside table. Next to them, Johnny saw the traveling alarm clock, small, squarish, a pale ivory *Junghans* his father had purchased in Switzerland before the war. Its square brown carrying case with the snap-front lid was on the other side of the books, lid open, with several of Pyotr Mikhailovitch's quill toothpicks stacked in it. Johnny picked up one of the books. Beneath it lay his father's string of amber worry beads, one of them with a mosquito frozen in it. The book Johnny held was Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*. He opened it. Most pages had one or two words marked; Pyotr Mikhailovitch would place a precise little check mark in the margin to indicate an unfamiliar word, and then write its meaning at the top or bottom of the page, whichever was nearer the check mark. *Curricles* was marked in the chapter on Caligula. So was *suppurating*, and *buskins*. "... *his technically incestuous marriage*" merited a tiny question mark which had then been underlined, as if in

afterthought. A small piece of paper marked a place further along in the book. Johnny turned to it. It was the chapter on the Emperor Vespasian. Section 18 began: "*He first paid teachers of Latin and Greek rhetoric a regular annual salary of 1,000 gold pieces from the Privy Purse; he also awarded prizes to leading poets, and to artists as well.*" Pyotr Mikhailovitch had marked this passage in the margin with a solid exclamation point !

"This must put you right to sleep," Johnny said.

His father shook his head. "It is all facts. Pure facts. A clear narrative. This—," he picked up one of the other books, "—is much better for sleep. And dreams." It was La Fontaine's *Fables*, in French. Johnny laughed as his father was explaining, "He took from Aesop, from Babrius, from Avianus."

"Why does it put you to sleep?"

"He had to make it his own," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said, and with a sigh added, "The French." A sympathetic smile appeared. "They are all very philosophical. Krilov's Russian fables are more—," he paused to make a half-hearted declamatory gesture as the word came to him, "—earthy, yes? About food, and hunger, and greed." He paused again, this time to look around as if re-establishing certain simple bearings. "What time is it? Should we think of food, too?"

There was a hamburger place within walking distance. It had sit-down tables with little lamps hanging above each table; one could order something besides hamburgers. It was a crisp, cool fall evening and they walked with a hurried step. Pyotr Mikhailovitch looked up and saw something. He slowed and touched Johnny's arm. "The hunter's moon." Johnny looked up at the heavy yellow-white globe hanging hugely in the immediate sky above them. "I am not a hunter," Johnny heard his father saying. "Yet I enjoy travel."

He looked at his father. "What are you talking about?"

"Turgenev, in one of his stories from his *Notebooks Of A Hunter*, wrote that

one of the principal advantages of hunting is it requires you to go from one place to another. To travel, voyage. He addressed this opinion to his *Dear Reader*, and explained that for someone like himself, with little to do, such movement was pleasant. I am not a hunter, I have much to do because I am no creature of leisure, yet I enjoy travel."

"So do I," Johnny agreed.

"You have done little," his father replied, and then seemed to reconsider because he gave a small shake of his head. "You would not like to hunt."

"I don't know," Johnny said with a small shrug.

"It requires killing. Turgenev made it appear worthy of him. I think it was the guns and dogs and various people he encountered which made a difference; the guns were special."

In the restaurant, taking their chairs, Pyotr Mikhailovitch said, "I once held a truly lovely weapon in my hands, if one can say this of a weapon. A Purdey, what is called an over-and-under." He glanced at his son, eyes cheerful and questioning.

"The English shotgun," Johnny said, nodding. "Sure. Of course."

"Of course?" his father said with astonishment. "How do you say, 'of course?' How do you know of it?"

"From the catalog, that book I had."

"What book?"

"A catalog somebody gave me when I was about nine or ten. I remember it very clearly. The company's name was Stoeger. The catalog was called *The Shooter's Bible*."

"*Bible*?" Pyotr Mikhailovitch was appalled.

"That's what they called it."

"Disgraceful."

Johnny grinned. "It was terrific."

The cover had a picture of a majestic stag on it, not as an offered target but as some sort of a hunter's hallowed icon. The book itself, almost six hundred pages long, dated from the '40s. Johnny had no idea who had given it to him, but the catalog was truly unforgettable. There were rifles and shotguns, pistols and revolvers, air guns, targets, decoys, gun cleaning equipment, cases and holsters, sights, scopes, and field glasses. Almost thirty pages were devoted to ammo and ballistics. The back half of the catalog offered clothing and camp equipment, boats and motors, fishing equipment, bows and arrows, golf stuff. Even dog appliances (Spratt's tonic & condition tablets for dogs and puppies, 60¢ pkg.). The last pages were devoted to gun parts, twenty-five of the pages to Winchester rifle and shotgun parts alone. As befitting a catalog dedicated in principle to hunting, most of the long guns were shotguns, all arranged with neat illustrations of the weapons lying parallel on the page, each above its own description. There were Remingtons and Marlins, and Powells of Birmingham. There were four Zephyrs, and the elegant L.C. Smiths manufactured in Fulton, N.Y. Most memorable, though, were the lever-action rifles, the Winchester 94, called "America's Favorite Deer Rifle," the Savage big-game number, firing the exclusive .300 Savage Hi-Power cartridges, "ideal for Alaskan bear, moose, and elk." The .22s were even more tantalizing, for example the Marlin 25-shot repeater, though the ones actually within any kind of realistic money reach for Johnny were the bolt-action single shots. The Stevens "Crack Shot," at \$5.95. Or the Mossberg "Clip Loader" \$11.00.

"Have you ever fired a gun?" Johnny's father asked.

"Sure," Johnny said. "A few times. At summer camp, remember? You saw the rifle range." Pyotr Mikhailovitch nodded. "And a shotgun, once. In Lake Forest, at that rich man's house."

"What rich man?" Pyotr Mikhailovitch's tone was most direct; in his lifetime he had known a score of rich men.

"With the twin daughters."

"Annabella, and Mertille," Johnny's father said.

"Right," Johnny said, surprised his father remembered the names.

"He allowed you to fire a shotgun?"

"They had a skeet range. I missed."

"I detest weapons," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said.

"It depends who uses them," Johnny said.

His father shook his head. "No, it does not." He paused. "I once had a rifle, a single shot which belonged to someone who worked on the adjoining estate. It was not mine, I had it to—to hold, use if I wished. It was unloaded. I was told this, and I believed it. Volodya, my brother, was in the room. I pointed this unloaded weapon at him and pulled the trigger. It made a hole this large in the wall, just next to his head." Pyotr Mikhailovitch's hands and curved fingers made a circle some eight inches in diameter.

"What happened?" Johnny asked.

"That was what happened." His father's look softened, took on something unexpectedly paternal. "Do you mean was I punished? No. How could I be? Everyone had heard the man tell me the rifle was not loaded. But now I know that there is no such thing as an unloaded weapon."

Walking back to the hotel, Pyotr Mikhailovitch reached into a small pocket of his buttoned vest and took out a quill toothpick. He started to slip it into his mouth, then held it out for Johnny to see and appreciate. "New," he said. "I made several some weeks ago. There were many feathers on the shore." Johnny's father took daily walks along Lake Michigan's shore near their home in Chicago. He collected among the fallen seagull feathers, selecting those that were obviously newly-shed, large, and visibly clean. These he would bring home, clip down to size, and then boil for several moments, a final cleansing.

In the lobby of the hotel Pyotr Mikhailovitch delicately took the toothpick from his mouth and looked around. "Where can we go for some minutes?" he wondered and then led the way across into a large salon. The few standing lamps cast dim light, the mood was pallid and uninviting. Pyotr Mikhailovitch produced a second toothpick from another vest pocket and offered it to his son. "Fresh. For you." Johnny put it in his mouth. "I will go upstairs now," his father announced with cheerful resignation. "I must decide what to tell Harvard about Russian cinema. You, I am sure, have your own work to do."

"Not that much," Johnny said. "Some reading."

"Chekhov," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said.

Johnny shook his head. "Social Studies. I have a class tomorrow morning. I should reread a couple of chapters."

"And Chekhov?"

"I have all weekend. It's due Monday."

"Bring it tomorrow," Pyotr Mikhailovitch suggested. "I do not know it in English." He paused. "*Chaika*," he enunciated. Johnny knew it was Russian for 'seagull,' and suddenly remembered something which had nothing at all to do with the play. "Go and read your chapters," his father urged affectionately and the urging briefly dispelled the memory and produced other sudden and soft disparate ones. Pyotr Mikhailovitch took Johnny's face in his hands, kissed him on the forehead, and then on the cheek. He let go of him and with his right hand swiftly and lightly made the sign of the cross on Johnny's forehead. "*Spi spokojno*," he said quietly. "You haven't forgotten that, have you?"

"I've only been here eight weeks," Johnny replied, homesick.

"Sleep peacefully," his father repeated in English.

Back in his dorm room Johnny put the copy of Chekhov's plays aside to take

with him the following day. What he had remembered when his father said the word *Chaika* was a strong wind, a very strong wind blowing off Lake Michigan. Beyond the shore small whitecaps were being ripped up into the air. On shore it punished the long stiff beach grasses, bending the small trees near the dock. At the house it was more of a sound, persistent, visible high in the trees where leaves rustled in confusion and turmoil. There was a branch outside the window of the room where Johnny was to sleep. When he first walked in, the view outside was clear. Then the wind abated for a moment and a leafy branch sprang into sight; back into sight, it turned out.

Pyotr Mikhailovitch had stood on the dock and peered out at the endless expanse of roiled blue waters. His eyes were narrowed against the constant wind and it gave him an unfamiliar resolute expression. The pose reminded Johnny of a production still his father had shown him from a film Pyotr Mikhailovitch had pronounced "stupid and silly." There on the dock Johnny told his father he looked like that photograph. "Do I?" he said, sounding pleased. Pyotr Mikhailovitch took out his handkerchief and wound it round his head like a bandana. "Like so, yes? *Le Corsaire*." He shaded his eyes with his left hand and lowered his shoulders to intensify the look. Johnny laughed.

"Having fun?" their host, George Carsey, said, coming up on them there and clearly not knowing what to make of the moment. Carsey was a small, corpulent man who had the fussy nervousness of a bureaucrat, which he was. A Chicago city commissioner, his old pal the Mayor had handed him the job of reestablishing a moribund arts council because His Honor had been persuaded it was time to counteract the widely-held opinion that he was a cretin.

"It is very much like the Black Sea," Johnny's father said.

"This is a lake," Carsey said. "The water's fresh. Seas are salt water."

"It is enormous," Pyotr Mikhailovitch pronounced.

Carsey beamed, as if complimented personally, and dropped a hospitable hand on Pyotr Mikhailovitch's shoulder. "This is nothing. You should see Superior. It's bigger." Carsey had invited Pyotr Mikhailovitch and his family up to his summer place some eight miles south of Manistee, Michigan, to persuade Ludinev to join the council.

"Baikal has seals," Johnny's father said.

"Beg pardon?" Carsey was a politician, a pro at sensing even the dullest hint of discord.

"Lake Baikal," Pyotr Mikhailovitch explained. "In the South Soviet Union, above Mongolia. An enchanted place. With fresh-water seals."

Carsey was not sure if Pyotr Mikhailovitch was joking, and clumsily flung a heavy arm up and out across the horizon. "Here on Lake Michigan we got gulls. Lots of gulls."

Johnny's father followed the gesture's stubby arc. So did Johnny. Large snow-white gulls rose and fell in the near distance, their broad wings working against the force of the wind. Pyotr Mikhailovitch turned to his son with a look of simple pleasure on his face. "Toothpicks."

Johnny discovered the rifle the next morning. It was under the bed he slept in. He pulled it out, held it for a moment, and then raised it to his shoulder and aimed, squeezing his left eye shut. Exploring further, he found a box of bullets in the lower right-hand drawer of the scratched-up desk across from the bed. .22 longs. He gingerly took one out, slipped open the bolt, and loaded the rifle. When he tried to unload it, the bullet stuck. He tried again. He couldn't get the bullet out. There was nothing else to do but see Mr. Carsey and ask permission to go out into the woods or somewhere and pull the damned trigger.

When Johnny appeared at the hotel the next day he found Pyotr Mikhailovitch

in the large salon. Warming sunlight slanted through the five windows facing south, making the room feel much less forbidding; with Johnny's father sitting near one of the windows in an old wing-back chair, one leg thrown casually over the other, a book in his lap, the place felt congenial. Pyotr Mikhailovitch saw his son and held up the book. "Look," he said, pleased. "I found it in a nearby bookshop." It was a paperback copy of Chekhov's plays, the same edition Johnny carried.

"You could have borrowed mine," he said, pulling a chair over to sit down opposite his father.

"I want us to read it," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said.

"Read it?"

"*The Seagull*. Let us read it, to one another."

"Aloud?" Johnny said. "Here?"

"Of course," his father said. "Here. Where we are. We can imagine the action as Chekhov describes it." He turned several pages. "The park on Sorin's estate," he read. His eyes rose to look at Johnny. "That is where we begin."

Johnny looked down at the book he held, unopened. It never occurred to him to refuse, plead a simple unwillingness to actually sit in that big room and read through an entire play. There were no excuses he could grab out of the air, in part because he didn't want to manufacture a reason which would force him to go away somewhere and hide out until the time available to read the play would have melted away. He also believed, sincerely, that he seldom disobeyed his father; true, this notion of his father's was more of a conceit than a command. Maybe there was room to say, "I'd rather not," and have his father urge them both to try: "Why not? Who is here? If anyone were to come in out of curiosity, we would appear to be nothing more than traveling players." Not me, Johnny thought, the unspoken scene playing itself out in his head. But he said nothing because, if nothing else, he had genuine confidence in his father. There was probably a reason, hidden or absurdly obvious,

for Pyotr Mikhailovitch to have made his suggestion. There had to be a point to it all. The idea of sitting in these overstuffed chairs, the smell of dust in the air, reading Chekhov aloud to each other suddenly seemed anything but bizarre. Johnny returned his gaze to the text he held in his hands and opened it.

"We know where we are then, yes?" his father said.

Johnny found the correct page, nodded, and began to read. "Why do you always wear black?"

"It is mourning," the character his father was reading began, "for my—," Pyotr Mikhailovitch broke off. "Actually Medvedenko asks why Masha always *walks* in black. It is more than the wearing. The translation is wrong."

"It means the same thing," Johnny said, thinking, please, no, not the whole play like this, not a footnote every five seconds, and ten perfectly good reasons for not going through with it catapulted themselves into his head. It was too late.

"It produces symmetry, yes," his father was saying, nodding. "But is that meaning?"

"Let's just read it," Johnny said, already resigned, exasperation coloring his voice.

"Of course," his father said readily. "Begin again." But before Johnny could open his mouth, his father's hand was on his arm to stop him. "You know, Chekhov called this a comedy." Pyotr Mikhailovitch waited to see what this news produced on his son's face, if anything. "Yes," he emphasized as Johnny frowned, enough of a reaction. "This is a comedy."

They began once again, Johnny fully expecting to be interrupted again, and then again. His father would make references to Chekhov productions he had seen, or Russian actors with whom he had worked; there would be tiny philosophical detours to consider aspects of Chekhov's moral vigor. All of it would be familiar. Johnny had come to understand that much of his life, certainly that portion which

nestled snugly against his father, offered qualities which became, in Pyotr Mikhailovitch's considerations, the stuff of a long, at times beguilingly casual, but never indifferent cautionary tale. But it happened only once, late in the second act. And it was sublime.

The first act went by faster than Johnny had expected. In truth, he hadn't known what to expect. They alternated voices with no particular scheme establishing itself though they did maintain a consistency of characters: Johnny read Masha, and the young Treplev, and the writer, Trigorin. His father read Madame Arkadina, her brother, Sorin, the doctor, Dorn, the teacher, Medvedenko. And Nina, because Johnny was reading Treplev when she makes her entrance— "Enchantress! Dream of mine!" Johnny exclaimed and felt no embarrassment. He was by then caught up not so much by Chekhov's drama as his father's gentle air of urgency, a momentum of nothing less than the pure verisimilitude of theater. As they read on, Pyotr Mikhailovitch made small corrections, reading a line not as had been translated in the English text he and Johnny were using. At the end of the act he lowered the book. "Good," he said. "You read well. More?" Johnny nodded. "Your Trigorin has a big speech in the next act. I did the play once, in the summer, in *Rostov*, on the Don. Everyone was there that year. Kholodin—you do not know the name—was our Trigorin. Poor Kholodin."

"Why?" Johnny asked.

His father replied with a simple sympathetic wave of his hand. "Let us continue. So, we now have who they are, and what they want or do not want--do not do, actually. In Chekhov, that is important."

In the second act, Madame Arkadina read from Maupassant, argued with the steward of the estate, and resolved to return to Moscow immediately. Her son, Treplev, appeared with the dead seagull he had shot, and laid it at Nina's feet, a clear expression of his misery. Seeing Trigorin, Treplev departed. Trigorin entered, busy

jotting down notes in his small notebook. Nina questioned him about his wonderful literary celebrity and Trigorin delivered himself of his long and detailed complaint, consigning himself to a fate of mediocrity where comparisons to Turgenev would confirm him to be the inferior. "I am false to the marrow of my bones," Johnny read. Nina disagreed passionately, allowing Trigorin to patronize her sweetly. At which point Madame Arkadina called from the house and Johnny's father unexpectedly put down the book.

"I intensely dislike his entire speech," he said. "Pure intellectual self-pity. All of them." Johnny waited for his father to return to the text so they could resume— Johnny wanted to know what was actually going to happen; he was also wondering if Trigorin would ever notice the dead seagull lying nearby. But Pyotr Mikhailovitch's mood had shifted. He moved in his chair and brought himself closer to his son, a strange sense of irritability about him disturbing the intimacy they shared so fully. "I have never really *liked* Chekhov," he murmured, his tone grudging. "In all of his plays, someone wishes to do something, but does not do it, go somewhere, but stays, immobile. And the talk is often of a boredom they themselves manufacture, at least for me. Arkadina threatens to go to Moscow, the three sisters *dream* of Moscow, Ranevskaya only sees when it is too late."

"What does she see?"

"The end of her beloved cherry orchard."

"Oh." Johnny was confused.

"Vanya, Arkadina is calling Trigorin to tell him they are not leaving."

"Oh," Johnny said again, and realized he was disappointed.

"They stay. All of them. Everywhere. *Kakaya toska*." His eyes moved to his son's. "*Ennu?*"

"Tedium?"

Pyotr Mikhailovitch shrugged generously. "These were people of substance,

not spoiled, so all the yearning they express has to be taken seriously." He shifted again in his chair. "They make me impatient, this Chekhov. Go to Moscow!" he said suddenly and loudly. "Go! I did!"

"To Moscow?" Johnny was thinking of the obscure reasons which had driven his father to abandon his homeland.

"Somewhere," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said. "I went ... somewhere. Away. To fresher air. Movement. People."

Johnny said nothing. He looked down at the play and wondered if they would read any more. What was the point, if his father disliked it so much? But he had read it so vividly. "What's wrong with Chekhov?" Johnny asked.

"Wrong?" his father said. "How do you mean? He writes lyrical characters who are absolutely real. And often moving."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"Absolutely nothing," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said. "But he makes me look for some special distant place on my own body, to *scratch*."

"Let's at least finish the act," Johnny said.

"Of course," his father said readily and raised the book. "The whole play."

"I want to know if Trigorin notices the dead seagull."

"Yes. Now," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said. "It inspires him to take more literary notes." An impish expression suddenly appeared on his face. "Do you know what John Gielgud once said?" Johnny shook his head. "'Beware of the bird.'" Johnny was clearly mystified and his expression obviously showed it. "Have you ever seen a stuffed seagull?" his father asked.

"No."

"In this play, one always uses a stuffed seagull." Pyotr Mikhailovitch laughed. "Not Kholodin. Not our dear Sergei Borisovitch. He persuaded a *Rostov* park attendant to procure for us a live seagull."

"It's supposed to be dead," Johnny said with an uncomfortable laugh.

"Kholodin chloroformed it, carefully. The effect was superb. Unconscious, it appeared precisely as I am sure Chekhov intended. The dress rehearsal was perfect!"

"Where did you keep it?" Johnny asked.

"A cage backstage. We all cared for it. Fresh fish from the market, an hour or two of fresh air in the small alley behind the theatre morning and afternoon. It was a good life, even for a bird."

Johnny laughed again.

"The night of our performance, it was left to me to administer the chloroform. I loathed doing it. But I could not refuse. As director I had to be prepared to do whatever I asked of my actors."

"Like a general," Johnny suggested.

His father immediately nodded. "A general. Absolutely. But I was afraid of somehow injuring the animal--all animals are so helpless when man holds them."

"What did you do, give it too much chloroform?" It was not funny now and Johnny didn't want to know. And something else had been stirred within him again, another memory.

"Too little," his father said. "Kholodin was convinced his Trigorin should not only notice the bird, but pick it up, so right here—," he touched the open page, "—as Nina explains that Treplev shot it, Kholodin chose to take it into his free hand. To consider it, possibly, *poetically*, his notebook and writing instrument meanwhile held in his other hand. He *posed*, and the bird awoke. It lifted its small head, pink eyes very angry naturally. Kholodin felt the movement and was able to grasp the creature's feet tightly. The gull flapped its wings, fell sideways out of Kholodin's hand, and continued to flap, almost drunkenly, but flapping, flapping. It began to rise. Kholodin would not let go. The audience, at first frightened and, you understand, *stunned* by

this collapse of all rhythms and tempi of the drama, recovered to the moment and the laughter began. Like thunder. Kholodin held the bird and it rose, above his head. He was pulled upward, but held tight. He was terrified. I could see him from the wings where I stood, how pale he was, the sweat on his face pouring down from his hair into his fake beard. It looked as if the gull would fly up into the air with him hanging under it. The audience could not stop laughing. Kholodin refused to let go. I think his feet left the stage for a small moment—"

"Papa!" Johnny cried in disbelief and laughed.

His father nodded solemnly. "It was the last image one had. I ordered the curtain to be lowered."

"What happened? Did he let go?"

"Finally, of course. He let go and the bird clumsily flew up into the hanging scenery and became confused. It broke a wing and fell back onto the stage." Pyotr Mikhailovitch grew sad. A hand rose to touch his dry lips. "The creature was in pain and had to be put out of its misery. Naturally, as director, I was told to take it away and kill it. I had no stomach for the task and refused. The order was repeated. I picked up the bird—in a blanket, to protect myself from its sharp beak. The gull was furious, as injured as it was. I carried it back to the park on the shore of the Don and looked for the attendant who had helped obtain it. He, of course, pretended not to know what I was talking about and threatened to have me arrested for disturbing the animals."

"What did you do?"

"I brought it back to the theatre where the company was waiting for me, all of them looking very guilty, I must say. I announced I could not and would not destroy the bird. Let Kholodin do it, I said. It was his stupid idea. Kholodin held his silence. He was still angry with me for not having used enough chloroform, and angry with the seagull for his humiliation. He borrowed a pistol from a local police station, and shot

it. Then he had me fired." Pyotr Mikhailovitch unexpectedly laughed, no trace of any bitterness. "Why do you always wear black," he quoted, and unexpectedly reached out to caress Johnny's face. "*The Seagull*."

"I shot a seagull once," Johnny blurted.

Pyotr Mikhailovitch did not immediately understand—Johnny could see it in his expression, the curiosity at first, his sheer simple *interest* in what his son was trying to say.

"I shot it."

"With what?"

"A .22 rifle. Up in Michigan."

"At your camp?"

"No," Johnny said. "That was in Wisconsin. In Michigan, when we went to that man's house, the politician, with the arts commission."

"The big house by the lake," his father said. "Where did you acquire a rifle?"

"I found it, under the bed in the room I slept in."

"And you took it and shot a seagull?" Pyotr Mikhailovitch's good-humored curiosity had been replaced by a look of incomprehension. "Why?"

"It was sitting out on the water, squawking. For hours. It didn't move, just sat there bobbing and the sun was setting right over it. Way out. I couldn't even see it after a while but it was still there, squawking, with the sun behind it. I had the gun from when he let me go out in the woods and fool around. So, I aimed at the seagull and fired."

"Once?"

"I just wanted to scare it away."

"But you hit it."

"Yes."

"—On the water, with a single shot?" Johnny nodded. "Are you certain?"

"It washed up on shore the next morning." Johnny could not understand what his father was looking for. "I found it."

Pyotr Mikhailovitch said nothing for a moment and then made a small gesture, a suggestion of sad acceptance. "To find the bird that way ..." He looked up to meet his son's eyes.

"I felt terrible," Johnny said. "I couldn't tell you. I was too afraid. I've been afraid for years."

His father said nothing and grew even more thoughtful.

On Sunday Johnny walked with his father to the train station, carrying Pyotr Mikhailovitch's one suitcase. Nothing more had been said about Johnny's confession. They had not finished reading *The Seagull* aloud. That Treplev eventually shot himself, Pyotr Mikhailovitch revealed almost in passing. When it didn't surprise Johnny his father seemed somehow satisfied, as if confirming for himself the boy had gotten the substance of the drama and could study its details on his own. "Do you remember what Chekhov said about guns, or at least one gun?" Pyotr Mikhailovitch said as they waited on the station platform. Johnny shook his head. "If, upon the raising of the curtain, there is a shotgun on stage—if the audience sees the setting and clearly sees in the setting this shotgun, this *weapon*—it must, before the final fall of the curtain, be fired."

"That was just his opinion," Johnny said.

Pyotr Mikhailovitch conceded this with a small gesture, but said, "You did shoot the bird."

As if cornered by not only his father, but all of Anton Chekhov's theatrical opus, Johnny Luddin could only nod.

"With one shot?" Pyotr Mikhailovitch said.

"Yes."

"You are certain?"

"One shot," Johnny said, trying not to sound annoyed.

"Incredible," Pyotr Mikhailovitch said quietly, and Johnny realized that his father was actually awed, even as he said it again. "Incredible."