

What does a herring taste like?

At first the gull ignored the man. It landed to the left of where Harry sat on his usual bench, and strutted towards the swings. It pecked a fragment of paper on the grass, but found no satisfaction. It looked back towards the bench. Maybe Harry's muttering had drawn its attention, but certainly the bird saw the man and acknowledged him, after a fashion.

They say that you should fix a gull with a hard stare if you want to keep it away from your chips or sandwich – but what to do if the gull turns its unblinking eye onto your ciggie, with the yellow-ringed envy of a tobacco fiend forced to kick the habit?

Can a gull digest tobacco? This one looked as though it might try, or, if it succeeded in taking Harry's roll-up from his restless fingers, ask for a light, and give him lip if he declined.

Mind you, for all that it was on the cadge, gull was no down-and-out – chest plumage of fresh, white linen, back and wing feathers soft in toning greys. And somewhere in the city, among the chimney pots, it shared a secure nest with the family and friends that made up its colony.

Why, then, was gull away from its buddies? They wheeled above the river, mewing, while lonesome gull pottered in the park. Scouting? No need, with all that aerial reconnaissance. Foraging? Why here, with wasteful restaurants a stone's throw away?

Perhaps the family was itself the problem, the shrieks of the youngsters wanting food or flying lessons; above all, their constant pestering for stories. 'Tell us about the sea, Uncle Jim, the fishing boats, the seaweed, the smells, the nets, the dabs, the mackerel, the crabs, the eels... What does a herring taste like, Uncle? Tell us.'

Gull should never have let on that he had once flown to the estuary and out to the open sea; that he had dived through the spray off the breakers; that he had picked up a baby cod as it floundered on the smallest beach in the world. Inland in the city, his single outing to the old

domain fostered the myth of Big Jim who had followed the trawlers, nested on cliffs, defended eggs against invading rats, and turned a rocky island white with guano.

Harry had never been to sea. Hercules transports had flown him to his deployments. His tales grew out of dry, dusty places, not storms and racing tides, and nobody clamoured to hear them. The few stories he insisted on telling, people could not bear to listen to, and turned away. The humour around improvised explosive devices and snipers is dark, funny only to those who have been there and seen too much. Bad taste – and not the kiddies' idea of a story at all.

Usually Harry moved on at night, the park being tricky. But, by dusk, gull and man had grown easy with one another. As the bird kept an eye open, Harry fell asleep on dry leaves and soft grass in a dip in the ground between the swings and the boundary hedge.