

Nel cuore dei gabbiani

In the Heart of Gulls

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Chapter 1

The weather forecast had been predicting a storm for days, but nobody imagined it would be this violent. The wind came up from the south, furiously pulling up shrubs, snapping off dry branches, blowing empty beer cans around in circles over the road. Powerful waves reared up from the sea, vaulting over the high wall of Sleepy Bay, flooding the small port. Years earlier, on a day just like this, a foolish young boy who got too close to the breakers was engulfed by a wave and dragged away by the undertow, never to be seen again.

To protect their boats, the fishermen anchored them far out from the entrance to the port and reinforced their moorings. Violet flashes of lightning fizzled across the dark sky. Thunder rattled the glass in the windows, and the alarms of parked cars fervently rang out. The rain beat down like needles as it was thrashed to and fro by the wind. The market place was submerged. Roads were transformed into fast-flowing rivers. Humans took refuge in their homes, and animals in caves.

Nothing and nobody could withstand such fury. Apart from the single white dot in the leaden sky that braved the force of the wind and the violence of the rain. Every so often it would swoop down as if it was going to plummet into the breakers, but would stop just in time to graze the top of a wave, stretch out its broad wings, rest its feet on the crest of water and ride it out like a surfer as the wave uncurled.

He would perform twirls and pirouettes as he surfed, and just before the wave broke he would flap his wings and soar up into the sky disappearing from view, only to then plummet down onto the crest of another one.

It was young Larus, the Seagull of the god Neptune, as the Sleepy Bay fishermen called him. He was the only one able to fly in the storm. The seagull, done surfing, was now having fun darting along low, brushing against the spray, his white feathers blending into the white foam, which made it look as though he was disappearing into the sea. Each time, however, he would soar up high again. Now he remained still against the gale, with his wings wide open, immobile, held up by the strength of the southwesterly wind. He floated in the air. He was the only living creature who, instead of being defeated by the fury of the storm, turned the unfettered power to his advantage by having fun. Since he was little his father had trained him to fly in ferocious winds and rain, while his mother watched, cheeping anxiously, stomping up and down on the threshold of the nest that sat at the top of the south-west cliff.

Staying still suspended in the air against the wind in perfect deadlock was his favorite hobby. He loved feeling the powerful air against his body and listening to it whistle in his ears. With his beak open he swallowed the wind until he almost choked, and laughed and sang in total freedom. As time passed he learned how to use the warm air streams to rise upwards and the cold ones to come down. He could recognize the nervous puff of the northerly, the wail of the southwesterly and the hot breath of the southeasterly. He could distinguish the density of the rain and, by licking it, could work out where it was coming from: if it tasted of dates and turmeric it was from the south and if it tasted of chestnuts and polenta, it was from the north.

Lightning was his mortal enemy. If you got struck while flying you would drop down as a lump of carbon. His father had warned him that “there’s no remedy for a lightning strike.”

Anyway, Larus had worked out on his own that between the clouds, during storms, strange currents of air formed that were as soft as algae and difficult to distinguish, and lightning ran along them. He was so well practiced in recognizing them now that he could anticipate the route and appearance of a bolt between the clouds. And so he could avoid them.

He explained this to his father, who was impressed.

Often, from the top of the cliff, they played a game of who could predict where the lightning bolt would appear first. Larus always won.

Chapter 2

A long time ago, a large colony of seagulls lived in the southwest cliff. Like in any community, sometimes there were scuffles, sometimes bickering, but nothing serious; routine parts of flock life. When they all went out to sea together to go fishing, the sound of their cawing echoed throughout the bay. The greedy ones dove for the biggest fish and not infrequently two ravenous beaks would seize the same prey. “It’s mine!” “No, I saw it first!” “No, I did!” A countess would come away with her head covered in pecks, until WiGu, the Wise Gull and governor of the colony was summoned by the din. “You all know the rules of the flock: half it.”

Peace was restored and, in respect of the rules, the two would divide the booty; sometimes it even happened that one would leave the whole catch to the other.

It was a flock with ancient traditions that had harmoniously perfected its rules over the years. WiGu embodied them all. His presence, always discrete, was enough to remind anyone who had lost sight of them. If their bellies were full, the flock would remain on the cliffs looking into the distance, as if they were waiting for someone who would never come. Other times they would sit on the sea, rocking on the calm waves.

When the fishermen pulled in the nets onto their boats the flock would circle above the trawlers full of fish. Their white wings stood out against the blue of the sea, and the sound of their cawing filled the sky.

But those seagulls weren't there anymore. They disappeared years ago. Without them the southwest cliff lay abandoned under an empty and silent sky. There were only the ivory flights of *Larus*, Seagull of the god Neptune, and his two old parents to cheer up the vastness.

Chapter 3

Larus had learned to fly very early in life. His father jokingly used to say that he had learned to fly when he was still inside the egg. In any case as soon as his feathers started to appear he launched himself off the cliff with no hesitation or fear. He plummeted down, almost crashing into the rocks, but then glided along just brushing the surface of the sea, rising up and swooping down again wailing with joy. Then, all of a sudden, terrified, he returned to the top of the cliff from where his father was proudly watching him.

“There's a completely black bird that keeps flying exactly where I'm flying. Did you see him?”

His dad started to laugh. “It’s your shadow, Larus. We all have one.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, but that’s the way it is.”

“What’s it for?”

“Nothing, as far as I know. Or maybe it’s to remind us that we’re alive, seeing as dead gulls don’t have them.”

In those first days of flying, Larus had fun watching his shadow: sometimes it was beneath him, other times more to the left, other times more to the right. Sometimes she ran ahead of him, as if trying to escape, challenging him to catch her. So Larus tried to reach her, but the faster he flew, the faster the shadow went, never letting him catch up.

“Now I’m going to bury you and leave you here,” he told her one day, trying to trample her down and hurl her onto the sand. He was on the beach and the shadow looked darker than usual. She remained glued to his legs.

Feeling disappointed he flew to his father. “Why is my shadow so dark, pops? Is she sad?”

“All shadows are dark.”

“But I don’t like it. I want a colorful shadow, a happy one.”

“It’s not possible.”

“Yes it is, I’ll show you.”

He spent the following days ruminating on how to make his shadow happy and colorful, and then he had a great idea. He went into a plant nursery and rubbed himself against the red petals of the roses, the violet ones of the cyclamens, the yellow sunflowers, coloring his plumage like a parrot. His mother and father hardly recognized him all dressed up like that.

But, despite the beautiful colors of his feathers, his shadow remained dark.

Disappointed, Larus plunged into the sea to wash all the colors off of his feathers and for days he felt sad and gloomy like his shadow.

Now that he was grown up, when he flew over the rooftops of the houses in the port, or over the sea, or above the fishing boats and saw his familiar shadow, he smiled remembering the time he was convinced he could capture and color her, while she remained dark and mysterious, slippery and maybe even – we'll never know – a little sad.

Chapter 12

He flew over bays and coves he'd never seen before, far from Sleepy Bay, far from his father, far from his mother. When he reached the limits of his own territory, he crossed them, and at the same time crossed the narrow limits of his heart. The rocks were interrupted by a long stretch of beach that had been smoothed by the wind. The cliff picked up again at a jagged grey crag that jutted out into the sea, at the top of which the wind and sand had excavated a round opening that looked like a boat's porthole. Larus perched there to give his wings a rest.

A sudden whiff, pungent and intolerable, enveloped him. He looked out on the other side. The miasma rose up from below; it was coming off a torrent of dark sewage that flowed into the sea, soiling the water and rocks. He had never seen such a torrent. During the rainy season, the creek at Sleepy Bay would swell up and turn brown, carrying tree trunks and branches and abandoning them on the beach, but it never smelled bad.

Larus could see slime as well as water and in the middle there were giant rats devouring dead fish. He was used to the clear open sky, the pure water of the sea, the smell of junipers and lilies, and so he had never imagined that someone could survive in putrid sludge.

"I wonder if my old man knows this place," he thought. "No. Of course not, for him there is only the sea, the cliff, the fish; anything beyond the coast doesn't exist to him."

He looked back. The sea, far away, at the horizon of his line of vision, shone like a soft line of silver. He flew towards the hill that the torrent came down from, knowing that he was venturing into the lands of bird shooting and carnivores.

Wary, he paid attention to every moving shadow, ready to flee. His snow white feathers stood out against the brown of the earth and the green of the pastures. He flew low in an attempt to pass through without being seen.

The torrent flowed through a gloomy ravine, squeezed between steep banks and covered by forest; going in there could be risky. There was no escape route and a hunter's attack would have been fatal. But Larus didn't think about that. Like a long black snake, the torrent curved to the left, then to the right, then left again, obliging the hills. On the north side of one hill humans had built a tangle of iron trellis, now abandoned and corroded by time. All that was there were ruined huts with worn out roofs and extracted beams. Higher up, a dark cave lacerated the belly of the hill, almost as though a giant mole had dug his hole, leaving piles of rocks and red dust on top. The wind transported the rusty dust onto the leaves making the forest look like it was permanently fall. It reminded Larus of the old mine in the mountain at Sleepy Bay.

A giant shadow engulfed him.

Larus instinctively zipped to the side into the branches of an oak tree. His heart was beating all the way up to his eyes. Whose shadow was it? He heard his father's words clearly now: "As soon as you see a shadow growing quickly and moving towards you, flee and hide; if you don't immediately see a spot to shelter in, plunge under the water." But the sea wasn't there now.

Holding his breath he spied through the leaves: there was nobody above him and nobody in the sky. A strange whistle came down from the top of the hill and above, against the brown sky, Larus saw a giant bird. Immobile. Standing tall on one very long leg, it towered over the forest. It had three wings. It wasn't flapping them like birds usually did: it was rotating them, sweeping the sky, and its suction created a vortex of air that would kill anyone who got caught up in it. When the intensity of the wind

decreased, the wings slowed their twirling and if the wind picked up again, the wings would spin so fast they became invisible.

Larus felt lost.

Nobody had ever told him about this kind of monster. He shrunk into his plumage, he wanted to become tinier and tinier and disappear. In the tense breeze of the evening, you could no longer see the wings; just the giant leg stood out high above the forest like an enormous pole. Gliding along on the wind, a dove went hurtling towards the invisible wings.

Larus wanted to shout. “Watch oooooout!” But didn’t shout in time. In an explosion of feathers, the pigeon fell severed into a thousand pieces. The monster didn’t move. It didn’t pounce on its prey like Larus had expected. Birds hunted because they were hungry, not because they enjoyed killing.

As if pulled out of his torpor by an abrupt awakening, Larus cleared the fear from his eyes and stared intensely at the monster. When the wind dropped he could see that they weren’t wings, but blades of metal like the propellers on fishing boats.

The creature standing up on the hill was no longer the monster created by his terrorized imagination, but rather a machine built by humans. A lethal one.

He took up flight again, careful to steer clear of the wind turbine blades. It was almost dark now, and seagulls don’t have eyes for nighttime. His wings were tired. His empty stomach was begging for food and water, but there were no sardines swimming among the trees of the forest.

“What I’d give for a feast of pilchards!”

He found shelter for the night between the roots of a holly oak. He huddled up in his feathers, his bones and muscles warm from fatigue, and fell asleep.

Chapter 13

There was a fertile plane made up of neat fields sliced into stripes of red radicchios, green lettuces and purple cabbages. Peaches, plums and pears hung from trees with flattened foliage, lined up in rows and covered by hail protection nets. The milk cows grew fat in enormous stalls and pigs destined for prosciutto and salami grunted away in their pens.

In the center of the plane there was a garbage tip. It was a hill made of trash that grew bigger and taller as the years went by. The trash was from a big city, and you could see its buildings and bell towers at the edge of the plain in front of the mountains. At dawn the garbage truck would pass through the streets and squares. It would stop in front of the bins, empty them and collect the plastic bags crammed full of refuse, leaving a putrid trail in its wake. It would go around from neighborhood to neighborhood collecting leftover food, empty bottles, old shoes and other scraps that humans were throwing out. When the container was crammed full it would leave the residential area.

As it neared the dump a flock of seagulls would arrive. The flock would follow it flying low until, on top of the heap, the truck emptied its load. Crawler bulldozers would flatten the discharged load, maneuvering backwards and forwards in an incessant rumble of engines surrounded by dense smoke and the smell of gasoline.

The gulls would then precipitate on the fresh garbage, slashing the bags with their beaks, voraciously rummaging and attacking each other to get the best bits. Among them there were rats as big as hares and snarling wild dogs with sparse, wiry hairs. It

was a hotheaded chaos, out of which somebody invariably emerged with a missing eye or some other injury.

“Enough!” cawed a gull that was bigger than all the others, with the beak of an eagle and feet no longer webbed but with claws like a bird of prey.

The other animals froze and fell silent.

With the eye of a falcon, the big gull started to examine the reckless crowd. He stopped in front of a cat that was holding a cod head between its paws: “I’ll be having this,” he said, staring the mangy feline down with his ferocious eyes. And he extended his claw towards the fish head.

“Of course Magnificent Curly, no problem at all.”

“This will also be mine,” he continued, and extended his claw towards the Gorgonzola rind gripped between the teeth of a rat.

“Certainly, Magnificent Curly,” and the rat immediately softened his grip.

“Ooh! Ooh! This too!” sneered the now greedy fat gull, seizing a blueberry pie offcut from the jaws of a dog.

And so it went on: snatching the cream of the crop from the group, the fat gull, the Magnificent Curly, filled his belly with delicacies. When he was full and heavy from digestion, he flew up onto a heap of worn-out tires from where he could watch over the whole flock and the plane. He believed everything he saw down there was his. The flock was his, the dump was his, the plane and the vast sky above it were all his. Nobody could take them away from him.

Looking into the distance, to the edges of the plane, the gull of prey saw a white dot getting rapidly bigger. “An enthusiastic little gull with not so much as an iota of experience,” he thought. “Only such a bird would flap his wings without trying to conserve energy.”

It was Larus. The squawks of the flock had reached the holly oak whose roots he had spent the night in and woken him up. Instinctively he exclaimed the Good Call of the Flock, which his father had taught him. As soon as he entered the plane he saw the cloud of wings and was engulfed by the screeching of the gulls flying low over the dump from which the fetid torrent flowed. Thousands of other seagulls were perched on poles or crouched around the foot of the trash mountain.

Some sluggishly watched Larus arrive.

With their beaks in the air they followed his speedy approach, envying the smooth flapping of the young boy's white wings.

“And who would this be?” cawed a fat and indolent bird, perched on a cabbage and irritated by such a show of enthusiasm.

“Your classic little wise guy trying to cut the line,” a nearby gull commented indifferently.

Larus headed directly for the top of the pile. With his heart in turmoil, he went straight to where the movement was most concentrated. It was an unexpected gathering, although he had been anticipating it for some time; this was the end of his boredom and he was finally going to have friends to fly around and explore with. And somebody he could ask: Why is there the sea? Who blows the wind? How do you fly with boredom?

Chapter 14

The closer Larus got to the trash pile, the more rotten the air smelled. Just by venturing into the trees and the hills the air had lost the salty perfume of the sea, the

juniper, the rosemary, and smelled instead of moss and mushrooms. But the air of the trash went straight to his stomach like rotten breath.

His enthusiasm at having tracked down so many gulls pushed him forth regardless and, rapidly approaching the top, he called out and chirped happily.

“I’m here friends, I’m here! My name is Larus!”

A sharp blow. Sudden. A second and he was on the ground, his beak in the dust.

Stunned, his bones sore and muscles stiff, Larus found himself paralyzed on the ground.

“You, where do you think you’re going?” A gull with the eyes of a falcon and the beak and claws of an eagle crushed Larus’s chest with his feet. “What’s wrong with you, screaming so much?” continued the gull of prey who everyone called Magnificent Curly.

“I was greeting the flock, according to the rules,” Larus explained, short of breath, stunned and confused.

“You were doing what?” Curly was intrigued.

“I was greeting the flock, according to the rules.” The Magnificent turned towards the circling gulls. “Listen to him! What the hell is he talking about? Did you understand?” No, nobody understood. “Flock? What is a flock? It’s like listening to my granddad,” Curly sarcastically resumed. “Rules? What rules? *I* am the rules! Actually no, I am the *law*!” He puffed up, freezing the entire flock with his predatory glance.

“And now tell me who you are,” he ordered.

“Larus. My name is Larus and I come from the southwest cliff.”

“Ah, there we go! Now I understand: you’re a sardinemuncher,” he sneered.

“You’re old school. What are you doing around here?”

“I was bored, I was looking for friends. And I wanted to find someone who could tell me why there’s the sea and who blows the wind.”

“As I suspected: another seabird out of his mind! This is what happens to birds that stay on the cliff watching the horizon from morning ‘til night.”

Then, turning to the gulls who had gathered in a small crowd, he said: “Now do you understand why my granddad abandoned the cliff to settle here and establish this colony?”

The gulls nodded. Apart from Larus who asked: “Your granddad? He lived on the southwest cliff? My cliff?” He looked at Curly, astonished.

“Yes, precisely the southwest cliff; he brought the whole flock with him. Just a couple of simpletons stayed perched between the rocks.”

“Why? Why did your granddad leave the cliff? Was he also searching for someone to explain why there’s the sea and who blows the wind?”

Curly let out a coarse laugh, almost like a growl, which the chorus of the flock echoed behind him. “My granddad came here because he was fed up of flying around for hours and hours and diving into the wet and cold water every day to fish for sardines just to get by. He always told me that life on the cliff was hard; the food was good, and the fish were abundant, even... But what a tough life! Better here, where lunch is free, guaranteed every day with no effort required.” Curly looked Larus in the eye: “Do you understand sardinemuncher?”

Feeling upset, Larus nodded.

“Listen, seabird,” Curly continued, “if you want to stay, feel free; but remember you have to wait in line to eat. I choose first, then the rest of the flock eats.”

Chapter 19

In Sleepy Bay, perched on the bell tower of the only church in the town center, Larus was able to keep watch over the roof of every fisherman. He was mesmerized by the skips of a sparrow or the stagger of a sluggish pigeon around a female he was picking up to brood in a nest thrown together in a drainpipe.

Now, Larus had settled on the top of the highest steeple in a city full of towers and belfries. From up there he could see rooftops in every direction as far as the eye could see, and the smell of car fumes was diluted by the time it reached him, so he could breathe more easily.

A white dove rose up from the railing of a flowery terrace. Her nest sat between the branches of a jasmine and a climbing rose that clung to the walls of the house. Her flight was short. A seagull flew straight into her and broke her neck, and she dropped down onto the sidewalk among the walking humans. The gull glided above the dove as she contorted in her final spasms and then started pecking to devour her. The humans tried to shoo him away. The seagull was brazen: wings open, standing upright; he attacked anyone who came close to defend his meal.

Larus was horrified. A seagull had just preyed on a feathered friend as if he was a bird of prey and was now assailing the humans too.

He didn't understand.

His dad had taught him that there had always been a pact between gulls and humans: humans didn't kill gulls, and when they pulled in the trawler net they would give them some of the fish. In exchange the gulls, flying over the sea, would indicate wherever there was a feeding frenzy, which was where big schools of fish gathered together in one place.

He was confused.

He'd never imagined that the blood of predators hungry for feathers ran in the veins of seagulls, let alone that they would so readily break the pact with humans.

What had happened to their heart?

Below him in the shelter of a chimney a pigeon pecked at newborn chicks in an unattended gull's nest, devouring them.

Elsewhere, black ravens snuck into the nests of pigeons to gorge on their eggs. Over the immense stretch of rooftops, white, black, grey and tawny wings battled in continuous crossings of flight.

Down below in the parks where the humans had dropped pieces of bread, flocks of sparrows battled with gangs of colorful parakeets. Entranced and confused by that voracious crowd concerned only with filling their stomachs, Larus thought that – deep down – there wasn't so much difference between them and his friends at Sleepy Bay. He spent the rest of the day on the top of the steeple, noticing neither hunger nor thirst, until the sun disappeared behind the roofs of the houses on the horizon. However, despite the fact that the sun had set, the sky didn't get dark. The night didn't become true night. The infinite and powerful city lights laid a luminescent blanket over the sky that stopped the dark from thickening. On the cliff, the nights were really nights. Only the brightness of the full moon in a cloudless sky was capable of dimming the stars. Not the other nights. The other nights belonged to the mysterious sparkle of the constellations. "Those luminous little dots, so far away, hide the most secret secrets in the world." His mother's words surfaced in his memory. "The constellations contain the secrets enclosed in the heart of every seagull. If you learn to read them you'll know the heart of the gulls of all the seas."

Larus no longer knew what was in the heart of seagulls. With his beak in the air he tried to distinguish the formations of the stars, which were concealed by the immense glare of the lights.

“What mystery do we hide in our heart?” he wanted to ask the constellations.

But the firmament, concealed behind the luminous haze, gave nothing away.

Chapter 20

What is in the heart of gulls? In the days that followed the question rolled around in Larus’s head like a loose marble. He looked for the answer when flying over the interminable stretch of rooftops, but didn’t find it. He swerved in and out between the antennae and skirted around the enormous chimneys that emitted heat and the smell of burnt air. He never landed on the sidewalk among the humans to rummage through the garbage like other birds did. The one time he got close to a fountain in front of a palace to quench his thirst, he almost got bitten by a cat. He managed to avoid it by a hair but didn’t even manage to dip his beak in the water.

A flock of seagulls had recently arrived in the city. They had conquered broad areas of rooftops driving away pigeons and ravens. Other gulls had settled on the banks and under bridges on the river that skimmed past buildings and churches.

When gliding along the riverbank Larus thought he saw some gulls he knew from the dump. He approached them.

“Eh, fisherman!” he heard a familiar voice call out. Curly was watching him.

Larus struggled to recognize him. He had slimmed down, his wings were tucked and he looked weak. Curly’s voice had lost its former arrogance.

“Fisherman, I’m hungry, will you bring me a trout?”

“What are you doing here? Why aren’t you at the dump?”

“It’s not there anymore, the humans destroyed it.”

“What do you mean?”

“After the flood the trucks full of food stopped coming; loads of soil arrived instead and they buried everything. There’s nothing to eat there anymore. Just a hill of earth.”

“So you came here. And the others?”

“Not everyone came, only the ones who could remember how to fly.”

Larus got a strange feeling. It was a new feeling and he didn’t know how to describe it.

“Hey fisherman, I’m starving; catch me a trout won’t you?”

“There are no trout here.”

“But I’ve seen fish in the water.”

“Chubs, barbel, perch; no trout.”

“Are they good?”

“They have a lot of bones.”

“It doesn’t matter! I’m dying! I’m begging you!”

“Why don’t you catch them yourself? Earn it.”

“I’ve tried, believe me, but I don’t know how.”

“You don’t know how? You’re a seagull! How can that be possible?”

“I’ve never done it. I was born at the dump, no one ever taught me.”

Curly, the arrogant gull who had frightened him so much, was now embarrassed and pleading with him.

“Is a seagull that can’t fish still a seagull?” Larus wondered.

“Watch me,” he said staring at Curly, “I’ll catch the ultimate fish for you. Watch how I do it and remember.”

Larus opened his wings. He no longer had the light plumage of a young gull. New grey grown-up feathers sprouted out of his wings and tail. Holding himself in the perfect flying position, his vigorous chest ploughed through the air, pushed forth by his powerful wing musculature. He flew up beyond the tops of the poplars and then plunged in a vertiginous nosedive, right down into the water. A second and he disappeared from view. He re-emerged holding a large barbel tight in his beak.

“Goodbye,” he said to Curly, leaving him the fish. The Magnificent took to stripping it avidly, with not so much as a thank you.

Chapter 21

It was time to return. Larus followed the train tracks, where red and white trains rattled up and down. The call of the sea and of open spaces guided his wings. In the distance he recognized the trellises and silos of the abandoned factory, which housed the nest of the little gull. Curious, he wanted to have a quick look.

“She isn’t here,” a magpie informed him. “Who’s asking?”

“Me. I just wanted to...”

“She left,” the magpie interrupted. “That presumptuous little mess-up left. She left everything and flew away.”

“Do you know where she went?”

“The sea? Ah, no really! I don’t know where the sea is. And I’m not interested. The little mess-up was saying something about rocks... sea... I don’t even know what those words mean, let alone where they are!”

Larus went back on his way.

In the middle of the plain, where the trash once piled up, a grass hill had popped up surrounded by pink oleanders, white roses, and yellow junipers. Along the sides, arranged into neat rows, there were linden trees and poplars. Pheasants pecked around here and there. Joyous little zebra finches zipped around crossing the paths of blackbirds and sparrows.

Low aeration vents rose up out of the ground at regular distances. Under the blanket of flowers the mountain of trash fermented unseen.

The air didn’t smell anymore. The torrent of putrid water had dwindled to a trickle. Larus followed it to the gorge between the hills, and ventured in.

He remembered everything: the blades of the wind turbine, from which he kept his distance; the ruined huts with worn out roofs and extracted beams. He recognized the dark cave that lacerated the belly of the hill, almost as though a giant mole had dug his hole, and the rusty dust on the leaves of trees, that made the forest look like it was permanently fall.

He flew fast and bravely, without the fear of being seen or attacked by predators, even though he was crossing their territory. He flapped self-assured, with strength and decisiveness. Once he was out of the woods, he saw it, the shiny line of the sea where the sun was going down.

On his feathers he felt again that fresh salty breeze that was so familiar. He could cut through the immense open sky in any direction he liked, and the air smelled of strawflower, which made him feel at home already, even though the southwest cliff was

still far away and he had a long way to fly along the coast. As the night drew near, with worn-out wings Larus perched on the imposing crag on which he had rested during the journey out. Fetid air no longer rose from the base of the rock. The black and putrid sludge had vanished. The fat rats were gone. Only the clean water of the sea lapped at the rocks.

In the last glow of light from the sun that had just gone down, he saw a solitary mullet in the low waves. He caught it quickly. As he held it in his beak he tasted again the flavor of a time long ago.

The night fell quickly and the stars shone. No violent light concealed their splendor. It was a moonless night, the night of a new moon. Far away he recognized the dim lights of the houses at Sleepy Bay. Out at sea the lights of the odd fishing boat flickered. And up there, in the immense ceiling that was clear of clouds, the figures of the constellations shone brightly. The crab to the east, the Moray to the west, the Bass down there and the Octopus over there. In the middle of them all shone the Sardines: a swarm of bright dots grouped together, just like a school of tiny fish.

It was the star sign under which he was born.

The next morning, Larus would fly along the sandy beach that had been smoothed by the wind, all the way to the southwest cliff.

Tomorrow, he would celebrate his return.

He would find the avocet with the curved up beak and the ash-grey heron, most likely standing up to their ankles in the mouth of the stream, waiting for fish to clasp in their beaks. And the cormorant, who was always intent on diving down and resurfacing to enjoy shrimps and small fish. Tomorrow, perhaps, he would meet that anxious little gull who was passionate about flying and was attracted to the sea, who escaped from the wreck of the factory and moved far from the know-it-all magpie. Tomorrow he would

fly over the rooftops of Sleepy Bay, the port, the fishermen out at sea, greeting them all with the deep caw of an adult gull.

Tomorrow.

But now, in the night as everyone slept, a dark outline on top of the crag, Larus contemplated the splendor of the universe. Even though he felt really at home, everything felt mysterious and enchanting. With his beak in the air, enraptured, he examined the constellations, spied on the stars at the edge of the hemisphere, and was determined to unveil the secret of all secrets: what is in the heart of gulls?