

# SOCIAL MEDIA

by Roger Jones

Patrick is watching gulls. He watches them every day, glancing up from his computer screen, sometimes briefly, sometimes longer, sometimes removing his headphones and pushing the computer aside altogether to lean forward on the broad open windowsill. This on the few days when the sun shines, when the dank, cold wind in from the Firth of Forth doesn't blow over all Edinburgh.

Just now the window is open and Patrick is watching three gulls stride about the roof crown of the Lothian and Borders police station across St. Leonard's Street. Patrick's building has five floors, on the otherwise four-floor block. He can see all the rooftops east of him toward Holyrood Park, all splotched white with gull droppings.

Two of the gulls on the station roof take off together, as on a signal. The third follows two flaps behind. They course in tandem up over the green of the park to the uplift of the Salisbury Crags, soar the slopes back and forth, maintaining their formation, then catch a thermal and bank into a circle, riding high and higher over Arthur's Seat, joining a wheeling gaggle of ten others, the top gull barely visible against the white of a towering cumulus cloud. Patrick stares at the top gull, imagining its viewpoint: the crags, the park, the palace, the whole city spread out below.

On Patrick's computer screen is a short paragraph ending with 2 @ 500mg acetaminophen, three times during the day at six-hour intervals. Continue five days. Evaluate. Patrick is a medical transcriptionist, working freelance for three doctors' offices. He links via e-mail to a secure database from which he downloads audio files of reports from patients' office visits. These reports he transcribes and returns to the database, so they can be inserted into patients' records. The work is entirely routine, requiring neither editing, commentary, nor—he is careful to maintain—consideration. This is the way he wants it.

Because Patrick is really a fiction writer, or wishes to be, anyway, here in

Roger Jones's fiction debut was in *EQMM's* Department of First Stories in August 2011, with the story "Clouds." That heart-pounding thriller could hardly be more different from his second work of fiction, both in setting and tone. This new tale is quieter, and less hardboiled, but certainly no less intriguing. The author is an aircraft enthusiast whose non-fiction articles have appeared in magazines such as *Inflight*, *Cessna Owner*, and *Soaring*. He has recently completed an espionage novel set in the Australian outback between the wars. †

this self-designated City of Writers. Patrick came to university from a small town in the East Midlands, but ran through his funds in three semesters and dropped out. He doesn't like to think about that time, though it was brilliant in the beginning—clever types everywhere, smart conversations over pints into wee hours, radical ideas in the Gothic halls. He went with a girl for a while, but she said he was an emotional oyster. Then there were too many pints, and when he took up with Mary Jane he lost contact with his classes, and his finances. His mum cut him off, bitter-making then, but probably for the best. He has inhabited since a succession of unsatisfactory jobs. His current employment has been his best.

Patrick is writing a novel. He has been working on it for over a year. His concept is a thriller involving British secret agents, the royal family, a bomb plot against a World Bank meeting in London. He has done much research on hand weapons, IEDs, body armor, has pages of careful diagrams and notes on settings. He has lists of characters, outlines of dialogue, scenes, inconsistent partial synopses. He knows that he must get more involved with his characters, acknowledges that the project is not moving along as quickly as he would like. But he has time. His transcription work pays the rent for his flat and his pub tab at The Auld Hoose.

A squadron of gulls has alighted back on the rooftop of the police station. One or another will abruptly spread and fly a fast course up St. Leonard's Street and back. They do make a mess on the roof.

Patrick knows that urban gulls are a problem, gulls that have abandoned the Firth for the continuous cafeteria of the city. He sees them frequently perched on dumpsters, surprisingly large up close with their white chests and gray backs, strong yellow beaks with a red dot on the lower. They give him an arrogant eye as he walks past, disappearing into the dumpster when he is well enough down the street, to emerge with half a cheeseburger or a drooping piece of pizza, tearing at it, gulping it down, flying away with what's left. Sometimes they fly right below his window, snaking their airborne way against the building sides, heads swiveling. Are they always looking for food, all that aerobic skill and grace merely in the service of a next meal? The thought depresses him.

The Auld Hoose pub crouches along St. Leonard's Street just north of Patrick's flat. Its street-side chalkboard advertises EXCELLENT PUB FOOD SERVED ALL DAY, ALTERNATIVE JUKEBOX, FREE WI-FI, HAND-PULLED REAL ALES, DART BOARD. Patrick's favorite pint among the Real Ales is Hobgoblin, whose publicity posters hang over the bar: *What's the matter, lager boy?* a gnome with a wicked leer under his peaked hat demands of all lookers, *You afraid of the dark?* Patrick likes to watch Greta, who works the bar during the afternoon, as she draws the ale, pumping the tall handle with a strong arm, filling the glass so the amber foam just courses over the top. The Hoose's Alternative Jukebox is filled with heavy metal, punk, and Goth, and plays all the hours the pub is open. Patrick looks down on The Auld Hoose doorway a great deal, watching people flowing in and out, almost as much as he watches gulls.

He works at fiction four hours every morning, eight to noon. He transcribes from two until six. That, with breaks for meals, and a late walk in the park when it isn't raining, is his day, his week. He works weekends too, mostly. Occasionally he tries to mix into groups in the pub. Masses of students come

in—for the ales, the jukebox, the food, but mostly to be together, to joke and laugh and tell stories on each other. Hanging on the edge of a group, Patrick may be invited in as the pints go down and the bantering grows raucous. Maybe there will be a girl he has an eye on, more rarely one who has her eye on him. But as the groups break up after midnight and the pub empties out, the girls in their coats and scarves leave on the arms of men or other girls. He goes home to sleep alone, to write again, to watch the street and the gulls.

A gull flies by now, close to the wall just below his window, so close Patrick could almost reach out and touch the gray wings with their black tips. Abruptly the gull's head swivels up toward him. Patrick gives a small start, then stares as the gull pulls into a climbing left turn, makes a broad circle over St. Leonard's Street, and comes around again, eye level this time. There is no question the gull is looking at him. Then it winks . . . or simply blinks; Patrick can see only one eye. Patrick draws back from the window as the gull banks again, a much tighter circle this time, comes straight toward the open space, rears up, wings back, legs out.

"Shit!" says Patrick, stumbling backwards over his chair. Is the gull coming through the bloody window? But no. At the last moment it flaps twice, then settles lightly onto the sill, wings folding tight across its back. It stands tall, white and gray, yellow-beaked, dominating the space. It never takes its eyes off Patrick, cocks its head, an appraising stare. It takes a step left, then back right again, finally lowers its head and makes three strong pecking motions at the concrete sill. What can that be about?

Patrick has an idea. The bird wants food. It wants a handout.

"You're a cheeky bastard," says Patrick, but he is already thinking what he has that he could feed a gull. Peanuts. He has a packet of peanuts. Patrick backs away from the window to the pantry, half thinking the bird will fly after him. But it doesn't, only walks its step left, then back. But neither does it retreat when he approaches the window with his packet. He spreads a handful of peanuts on the sill. The gull begins immediately to peck, picking a peanut up in its bill tip, kicking its head back to encourage the peanut down its throat.

Patrick watches the gull, and the gull watches him, cocking an eye between peanuts, which are soon gone. Patrick spreads the rest of the packet and stands back. The gull pecks and swallows steadily until the windowsill is bare, cocks its head again. Its question couldn't be any clearer if it spoke. Patrick spreads his forearms in a shrug. The gull shakes its head, then turns, spreads, crouches, and is out the window in a single flap. Patrick looks out, sees it flying south over St. Leonard's Street, gaining altitude above the buildings.

It is a bright day, and Patrick is out in the park in just a scarf. At the west end of St. Margaret's Loch swans are preening on the bank. Muscovy ducks paddle about just off the shore. A flotilla of gulls floats out toward the center. Patrick stands with his hands in his pockets watching the swans, looks up startled when the gulls abruptly rise as on command and careen en masse toward him on the bank. He is retreating when he sees the true source of the gulls' interest, a girl approaching with a bulging plastic sack. The lead gulls are already upon her as she reaches into the sack and begins flinging wide arcs of

birdseed upon the bare ground. Patrick is watching the sweeping motions of her arm from within the swirling mass of birds when he recognizes the girl as Greta, from the Hoose.

"Hi, Greta!" he calls out, over raucous gull laughter. She raises her sweeping arm to shield her eyes and waves back, flinging the last of the birdseed from the open mouth of the sack.

"Do you do this often?" he asks. She has stepped back beside him, and they stand watching the flapping and thrusting melee of the gulls.

"Enough so they expect me," she says.

"I had a gull . . ." Patrick begins, then stops, feeling the story of the windowsill gull somehow inappropriate. But Greta has now turned from the gulls and is looking at him, so he continues.

"I had a gull come right to my window last week," he says. "Flying down St. Leonard's Street the way they do, you know, it looked at me, then came round and right onto the sill. Seemed to know just what it was about, just what it wanted."

"Vittles," says Greta, with a smile. "They're ravenous beasts, they are. They'll do anything for food. Did you feed it?"

"I did," says Patrick. "I gave it . . . peanuts. I had a packet handy."

"I'm sure it liked that," Greta says. "Lucky you it didn't walk in and raid the fridge."

Patrick gives a small snort.

Patrick has spent the day's writing time researching concussion grenades on the Internet. Now he is transcribing, and is just typing *rotator cuff tear, likely supraspinatus* when he is suddenly aware of a gull hovering outside his open window.

He hurriedly pushes the computer aside, reaches for scattering papers as the gull flaps onto the sill, ruffling its wings before folding them back. It looks at Patrick with one eye, then the other, pecks at the surface. Patrick has a new jar of peanuts, purchased at the Tesco on Nicolson Street. He has placed the jar under the desk, along with a scoop. Now he fills the scoop and scatters peanuts onto the sill and sits back. The gull begins to peck, lift, and swallow.

It is not until the sixth peanut that Patrick notices the paper tied round the gull's leg. Patrick sits forward, looks closer. The gull pauses for just a moment, then continues pecking and swallowing. A piece of paper it undoubtedly is, wrapped about the right leg between the knob of the knee and the webbed foot. A thin roll of paper tied with tiny bows, two twists of fine red thread.

Patrick stares, wondering what to do. The gull pecks on. Patrick fills another scoop and leans forward. The gull stops pecking as Patrick spreads the peanuts, but it does not step back. Patrick bends further forward, the gull eying him as he slowly reaches out, both hands across the sill towards the bird, sliding along the concrete. The bird stands as Patrick's hands approach, then lifts its right foot slightly: a gesture, an offering. Patrick pulls the loose ends of the upper bow and the thread comes away. He repeats with the second bow and the paper unfurls. Patrick twirls it off the gull's leg and steps back. The gull shakes the leg and goes back to pecking peanuts.

Patrick flattens the scroll of paper on the tabletop next to his computer. It is

roughly three by ten centimeters, lined paper, a juvenile hand in smeared blue ink.

*Help me, Patrick reads. I am 14, girl, prisoner in our flat by my parents. They will marry me to keep me from sin. Please please please help. Send message by gull. He is my friend.*

"Bloody hell," says Patrick aloud. The gull stops pecking for a moment and looks up at him, then resumes.

This is entirely bizarre, Patrick thinks. A rescue message on the leg of a sea gull?! Surely not. But an image materializes in his inner eye: a wedding ceremony, dark-skinned people, some in white clothes, others bright colors, a fringed canopy, the bride in white, slight, veiled, jeweled; the groom large, fat, old, sweating . . . Patrick shakes his head to clear the image, sees instead his sister, fourteen, blue-jean shorts and a green top, a blond braid, badminton in the side yard with his mum, shuttlecock flying, shouts of laughter.

It is possible, he thinks. He has read of Middle Eastern or African families, and Christian cultists, who incarcerated their daughters to "keep them from sin," until they could be married to older men of the parents' choosing. What can the girls think in such situations?

Patrick pushes the question away. The rush of images has left him dazed. He looks at the gull, pecking on the windowsill. Odd that the gull hadn't pecked the paper off. *He is my friend.*

Without making any real decision, Patrick finds himself cutting a portion of an old envelope to the same dimensions as the message paper. He begins to write *Your message received*, then thinks, *That's silly. Of course the message was received, or no one would be writing back.* He cuts another rectangle. *Tell me what I could do to help*, he writes.

What are the chances, he thinks, but he rolls the paper into a tight cylinder, and looks at the gull. Only a few peanuts left. How many peanuts can a gull eat? Will it let him tie the new paper on as readily as it let him remove the other? Patrick knows he won't be able to reuse the red thread, won't be able to retie the tiny knots. Besides, it will be better to use a different color, so someone would know immediately the bird carried a new message. Blue thread. Patrick has blue thread.

The gull stands its ground as Patrick slides his hands toward it again, lifts its leg obligingly as his hands approach. He wraps the paper tightly, reaches for the two lengths of blue thread he has cut. First knot tied. What will the gull think of the scissors he must use to trim the ends? The gull stands, leg lifted, looking away, stoic.

As Patrick withdraws, the gull shakes the leg briefly, puts it down, returns to the peanuts. Patrick spreads half a dozen more, sits back, and waits for the gull to finish. This time it doesn't even give him a glance, just turns and flaps away.

The gull doesn't return the next day. Patrick leaves his window open, though the day is rather cool for it, starts up whenever a gull flies past. He hesitates before going down to the Hoose for dinner. What if the gull comes and finds the window shut, him away? Surely it will come back. He thinks he might ask Greta, but then thinks not.

The next day is one of rain and blustery winds. Patrick cannot have the

window open on such a day, but he's extra alert to the few gulls that fly near. He finds himself wondering how the wrapped paper fared.

The next day the gull is back. Patrick pushes the computer aside and scatters peanuts from the scoop onto the sill. The gull begins to peck and swallow.

There is a paper on its leg, red thread ties.

"Well!" Patrick says aloud. The gull stops for just a moment in the process of swallowing, then continues. Patrick bends across the sill toward it, the leg ritual as before. Patrick unrolls the paper on the desk. The same hand and ink, the writing smaller.

*I am so glad you found the gull. I have a cousin, with a good family. Maybe they can take me. But I do not know. I must stay someplace while I find out. Can you take me?*

*Can you take me?*

"Can you take her?" That's what his mum asked, beginning his second year at university. His sister wanted to come, had earned a scholarship, not enough for everything, but enough that his mum could swing the rest, after she paid for him. But not for lodging too. Could he take her? Could she live with him? It was a bad scene with his mum, with him pushing away visions of his sister among his crowd, the many pints, straggling couples, Mary Jane in the hallways. What could he say? His mum filled the void with her own words, threats. And his sister, her face wet, cold. "You bastard," she said. "You selfish bastard."

Could he now take a fourteen-year-old girl, on any terms?

Could anybody take a fourteen-year-old girl on *these* terms?

Patrick stands up, walks away from the window, hands on his head. Be logical. Consider—absurdly, but still consider—the situation at face value. It is not unreasonable that a girl who escapes her household needs a place to stay while she queries her cousin, her cousin's family. But how can a cousin's family "take" her? How can that possibly work, between the families? She is, what . . . a legal dependent? The law will intervene, return her to her legal family. Except in cases of abuse. Isn't that right? Patrick knows vaguely that children are sometimes removed from parents in cases of abuse. There are agencies—child protective services or some such, foster parents. A civic process. Surely there is a civic process. But civic processes take time, and solicitors. Who would pay for a solicitor? Where would a girl stay while a civic process ground on? With him?

That all presumes the girl can be found by those in authority. No. She can't be thinking just to leave her abusive parents and disappear. No cousins. No civic process. Just disappear. Into his flat, his life. No. No fourteen-year-old would think to do that. Would she?

What if her family found *him*?

Patrick feels his throat clench. He pushes away images, but there's a new idea. He has heard of police operations designed to snare men keen to "take" young girls. Could this be a snare? More images to push away. No. This is too odd a circumstance. Those meets are made through Personals adverts, Facebook or some such. Surely not a sea gull. He looks at the gull, only three peanuts yet uneaten. "One step further," Patrick thinks. He sees his sister, crying.

He spreads more peanuts, scissors a rectangle, and writes. *I can take you*

*while you find out about your cousin. No longer. Name a place and time to meet. Let her name a meeting place in a note she sends away, out of her house.*

He ties his note onto the sea gull's leg, sits and waits for it to finish the peanuts and fly away.

Patrick transcribes for the rest of the day. *Initial screening. 47-year-old male. A-fib since 2002. Digoxin and Toprol ineffective. SECardioversion after 30-day a-fib. Current Coumadin (3 mg) and Tambacor (100 mg). Weekly Protime/PTT. What does all this mean? He has some idea, but he doesn't want to know more, doesn't want to think forty-seven is young for heart trouble.*

Nor does he want to think about the girl. Or her parents.

Patrick spends his writing time the next morning blocking movements of suicide bombers and MI6 agents for a battle in the triangular courtyard across Threadneedle Street from the Bank of England. He has printed a high-resolution Google map, sits with a straightedge and pencil, consulting Street View images, inscribing B and A circles from which he draws sightlines and considers pedestrian placement, obstacles. The weather outside is sunny. He works with an open window, looking out often, scanning for gulls.

The next day is Sunday, and Patrick eats Sunday roast at the Hoose: slices of beef, potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, carrots. He lingers with a second pint of Hobgoblin, watching a group of students who have come in early, smiling from across the room when they laugh all together.

At two-thirty the next day he is typing *digestive complications: gastroparesis* when the gull flaps onto the windowsill. His pencil rolls the width of the desk and slips off the edge. Patrick moves the computer aside, reaches under for the scoop.

*Meet me in four days, Wednesday, if you can, the note reads, one big smear, but the rest clear. Waverley Bridge, top of ramp to the station. 9:30 A.M. I will wear a red hat. Thanks thanks thanks.*

Patrick feels his stomach turn over. My God. A place. A time. A signal. A real person, proposing a real meeting . . . and then . . . everything else . . . What else? The cast from Patrick's previous chain of thoughts jerks through his mind: dark parents and cousins, child protective servicers, solicitors. At the center, a slight girl in a white wedding dress, his sister with her blond braid.

Patrick takes a deep breath, shakes his head once, twice, then stands straighter. "Okay," he says aloud, to the gull, to himself. "Okay."

Waverley Bridge. *Meet on Waverley Bridge.* Busy. Airport shuttle, tour and city buses. Pedestrians, private cars, taxis up and down the ramps to the station. A good meeting place; certainly gives him no idea what part of the city she lives in, gives no one any idea of his own place either.

Patrick sits and writes. *I will meet you. I will wear a red cap too.*

Damp mist hangs in the air at eight-thirty on Wednesday morning, slickens streets and storefronts. Patrick strides briskly north up Nicolson Street, past the glass front of the Festival Theatre, past Blackwell's bookshop, the Cowgate overlook, left on High Street to the vehicle barriers, then right, down the twisting Cockburn Street hill to Market Street and the bridge. He guesses the girl will come on the city bus and cross the street to the station ramp gateway

to wait. He wants to be there early, to watch the flow of pedestrians on the bridge, riders getting on and off the bus. The Lothian number 36 bus services the bridge. The online Lothian Service Timetable showed number 36 buses in from Leith at 8:50, 9:02, 9:25, 9:45.

It is past 8:50 when Patrick arrives at the bridge. He crosses Market Street, walks past shuttle and tour buses parked nose to tail in the bus-stand lane. No girl is standing anywhere near the walking ramp down to Waverley Station. Patrick clutches his hat in his jacket pocket. It is quite red, with a stylized white C on the front, "An American baseball team cap," the sports shop salesman said. From Cincinnati, a team called simply the Reds. Patrick bought it when he came to college. Such caps were popular then.

The 9:02 36 Lothian bus worms its way between the tour buses into the stop. A young man in a tight black shirt and blue jeans bolts off as soon as the front door opens. He darts directly across the street, but the rest of the passengers from both doors move circumspectly, blending into the flow of other pedestrians north and south along the sidewalk. Several of the passengers walking south pull rolling cases. They walk past the line of buses to the crossing at the south end of the bridge, cross over, and retrace their steps north to the station ramp.

That is what the girl will do, Patrick guesses. She will move circumspectly. She will not want to draw attention to herself.

Patrick leans against the concrete bridge wall. He needs to think about something else for fifteen minutes. The absurdly Gothic Scott monument is off the north end. Walter Scott. Sir Walter bloody Scott. Scotland's greatest writer. Patrick had to read him in school. Everybody did. Interminable books. Groves and arbors and glens. Uniforms and costumery. The country had gone berserk over Scott. Half the streets and stations in Scotland were Waverleys. Now . . . Ian Rankin. There should be a monument to him. Much more to Patrick's taste. And Irvine Welsh. Patrick wishes he had the courage to write like Irvine Welsh.

Patrick sees the 9:25 Lothian bus rounding the turn from Market Street. His heart speeds up. He swallows with difficulty, his mouth dry. He is between the stop and the crossing point. The girl will have to walk past him. If she is on the bus.

The doors open. A man in a dark suit is first off, from the front door. He hurries north. A woman with a colorful shopping bag and a head wrap steps down from the rear, moves around the bus toward him. Patrick concentrates, trying to keep up with the passengers. A couple from the front go north. A heavysset man in a blue zip-up jacket comes south. More couples, singles, men and women. Two chattering women open umbrellas as soon as they emerge from the rear door, come toward him, still chattering. People duck around them.

And then there she is. A thin girl in a long, lightish dress, a red floppy hat, stepping with her case carefully down from the rear door. She reaches to pull the handle up, tilts the case and rolls it over the curb, coming toward him. The brim of her hat shields her face. She is looking down, avoiding hurrying feet. He is careful not to stare, squeezing his own hat in his jacket pocket.

He follows her with carefully casual eyes as she works her way within the flow down the bridge. When she is ten meters away he pushes off the wall.

He sees her hesitate at the crossing, looking not for traffic, but for fast

walkers, pulling her case over the slickened stone roadbed. She has crossed and turned back north before he reaches the crossing himself. Two tour buses nearly touching back to front round Market Street and lumber toward him. A woman with a dog on a leash bumps into him when he stops, saying "Ooh!" Then, "Do pardon me." Then "Careful there," as other crossers mash in behind them. He can't see the girl, not with the buses.

By the time they have passed, she is well up the block, more than halfway to the ramp. He sees her hat bobbing among the heads. He crosses hurriedly, dodging slower walkers, making up distance. The flow slows before him, people moving irregularly around two couples strolling all four abreast. "Damn," he says, under his breath. He can no longer see the red hat up ahead.

Four taxis lined up the exit ramp from the station block the sidewalk. People struggle between bumpers. Once past, Patrick moves aside and peers up the block. He sees the hat first; then, through a gap in the flow, he sees the girl. She has stopped, standing against the gate corner at the top of the ramp. Her back is to him, her case at her feet. Patrick takes a breath, extracts his crumpled Reds hat from his jacket pocket, puts it on bill backward, steps out.

He is halfway to the girl when a movement up the street arrests his eye. A large man across from the ramp has stepped from between two tour buses. The man wears a camel overcoat, has a squarish face, dark moustache. He walks briskly into the street, raises a hand to halt a car. The driver blows his horn. Now the man is across the street, walking straight toward the ramp, toward the girl. Patrick increases his pace, dodging, but the man will get there before he will. The girl's back is still turned. Patrick doesn't know what to do. His heart is hammering. Should he call out to her? What would he say? What, with people hurrying all around?

Patrick pushes past two older women. He doesn't want to run, but now the man is nearing the girl, putting out his hand, touching her on the shoulder. The girl turns, her hat still covering her face. The man bends down, says something to her. She pulls away, but he grips her arm, pulling her back, picking up her case with his other hand. They move off north up the bridge, going quickly, the girl stumbling.

Patrick slows, half paralyzed. Who is the man? Her father? Her prospective husband? He must have followed her on the bus, gotten off after she did. Patrick was not watching, not after the girl got off. And now . . . the man is taking her away. Back to her home, or worse.

"No!" says Patrick, aloud. A man walking in front of him half turns.

Patrick is walking fast now, his fists clenched, up the bridge toward the hurrying man and stumbling girl, dodging other walkers. He knows what he will do. He will reach out and grasp the man's arm, the one carrying the case, spin him around. "You can't bloody take her!" Patrick will shout, loud enough to make a row. "We will go to the police!"

He is only a dozen steps behind when he is shoved almost off his feet.

"Step aside!" A harsh, official voice. A heavysset man in a blue zip-up jacket rushes powerfully past him. Up the bridge a man in a dark suit strides across the street. The overcoated man stops abruptly, jerking the girl backwards, whirling about until he sees the man in the blue jacket converging. Then he sags, releasing his grip on the girl's arm as the man in the dark suit arrives.

Patrick stands transfixed against the concrete side of the bridge, where his

momentum has carried him. The men stand too, exchanging words Patrick cannot hear. The girl has pulled a little away. No one is talking to her. The flow of hurrying walkers parts around the four of them.

What has just happened? Who are these men? Patrick is immobilized with confusion. Should he rush over now? Shout? Make a row? No. It seems . . . not.

The overcoated man sags further as the other two men take his arms, one on either side. They turn and walk north, the girl a step behind them. Patrick is just near enough to see when she turns her head, her hat now pushed back. She is not a girl at all. A woman, not old, but not young. A hard face. She takes in the street, passes her eyes over him without stopping, turns back again. The four of them walk away up the bridge. Patrick exhales.

"That was a near thing." A woman's voice behind him. Patrick jumps. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," the voice says. Patrick turns to see the woman with the colorful shopping bag from the bus. He stares at her stupidly, until she pulls the head wrap down about her neck.

"Greta!?" he croaks.

"I didn't know what to think when I saw her get on the bus with that hat." Greta gestures with the shopping bag. "Imagine the coincidence! And then of all things a sting! Right before our eyes! What are the odds? It might have been very unfortunate if you had got to that girl before the other fellow. Unfortunate for you, I mean. If you had, the other fellow might have gotten quite away."

"I have no idea—" Patrick begins.

"Oh, of course you do, you and your red cap." She points. Patrick jerks the cap off, stands holding it, staring. People on the sidewalk move around them.

"I saw you doing your best to get to her," Greta says. "You came because of the gull. I'm quite sure you did." She smiles brightly at him.

"You sent the gull?" Patrick asks.

"I did, in a manner of speaking. After you told me about the gull on your windowsill I tried it myself, putting seed out, bits of bread from the Hoose. A gull came right away. I don't live far, just round the corner up Rankellor Street. I thought it might be the same one. I made friends with that gull. I told you at the loch, they'll do anything for food." She smiles on.

"But . . . the notes . . ." Patrick is shaking his head. "Why?"

"Bit of a lark, you know . . . pardon me," Greta says, giggling. "You're a writer, right? Well, I thought I'd give you a story. People all over the world are meeting on computers, building whole stories of themselves. So I thought, why not set up a story by sending the gull out with a note, a story of an exotic meeting? I have imagination too, you see."

Her smile fades to uncertainty, color rising in her face. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a red rain hat. Patrick stares at it. "But . . ." he says, struggling, "we've already met. Lots of times."

"Not *met* met," Greta says, "not with a story."

Patrick shakes his head again, can't help smiling. Greta smiles back, reaches out and links her arm with his.

"How about a spot of tea?" she says. "I have a key to the Hoose kitchen." ●