

Stompie by Harry Friedland

Simone is the patron saint of wounded animals.

The seagulls of Sea Point never had such a good time as they had since we arrived here. Every time a bird gets its claws tangled in nylon, or its toes chopped off, it heads straight for our patio where it gets untangled and top quality full-grain bread, and shelter, and sympathy.

You'd be amazed how many seagulls lose their toes or get tangled in nylon. You have to get to know seagulls in order to learn this.

And then there is Stompie.

He is easily recognisable - his left foot is missing completely, and he hobbles around on a stump, although he flies normally. He is the tamest of the seagulls (and now he is also the fattest, although when he first got here he was pretty emaciated), and if Simone doesn't feed him to his satisfaction, he follows her into the kitchen, saying, "Hey, wassup, what are you going to do about my supper then, hey??" - Frikking cheek, hopping around on his stump ...

I think we've known Stompie for at least two years now. Even Preeencess knows him, and calls him by name, as if that was a perfectly normal thing to do (work for the Friedlands, get to be like the Friedlands ...) Of course, Stompie thinks it's perfectly normal too. I wonder if he knows our names (or maybe he just knows us by our attributes: "Feeder" and "Asshole")

Then last week when I was taking down the *succah*, I noticed that one of our plastic patio tables had blown over in the strong wind the previous night. As part of the general clean-up, I flipped the table back onto its legs - and there, under the overturned table, was a squashed dead seagull with its guts squeezed out, in a pool of seagull blood.

Omigod, I thought, some boid must have sought shelter from the wind under the table, because this is a natural place for a seagull to seek shelter (after all, this is where the food comes from), and *wham!* the table got him ...

Then an awful thought struck me: the tamest seagull of all was Stompie. If it was to be a case of probabilities, then the probability was that it was Stompie. Simone wasn't on the patio at the time. I better get this off here, I thought, before she comes back outside and gets all grief-stricken and we have to sit shiva for a week. Gingerly I got hold of the flat bird by its wing and flipped it over. One gnarled claw pointed at the sky. I couldn't see another claw. Oh, shit. Its Stompie, I said to myself.

I walked into the flat as if nothing had happened, fetched a plastic shopping bag and returned to the patio. Looking around quickly, I checked that Simone wasn't in sight, then deftly flipped the carcass into the bag, knotted it closed, took it into the kitchen, and dropped it into the bin. "I'd better get that out of here chop-chop", I said to myself, "or the frikking bird-lice will be all over the place" ...

"I'm just taking the rubbish downstairs, Sim"

(inaudible answer from the bedroom)

And off I went ...

I wondered when Simone would notice.

Days went by. Every now and then I'd enquire casually, "so has Stompie had his supper yet, Sim?" - and I always got a non-committal answer which didn't make it clear whether Simone had actually seen Stompie or not.

Eventually I couldn't take it anymore. This morning, I put the question to her directly:

"have you actually seen Stompie recently?"

"Well, he doesn't come every day - sometimes days go by and he doesn't show up". This wasn't helpful. Simone was going to start wondering if I was obsessed with the damn bird or something - I couldn't keep pretending that I was just asking casual questions like this.

I was quite sure that Stompie was dead and done for, I was just worried about how Simone would react when the awful truth dawned on her - although I suppose there must be a billion ways that a seagull could meet its maker - in the Cape, I suppose that that would happen mostly by a weaker bird being blown into the sea (which isn't a bad way to go, if you think about it - I once knew a girl who told me that she would like to die one day by falling off a high cliff into the sea - but she was quite stoned at the time we had that discussion)

So imagine my unbounded relief when Stompie suddenly appeared on the patio this afternoon, stomping around cheekily on his stump, marching behind Simone and demanding his fair share of supper (he gets fed totally separately from the other seagulls, so that they don't steal his crumbs - Simone stands between him and the others, and they hop about in impotent fury at this shamelessly preferential treatment). He was obviously hungry, because he followed her into the kitchen, and I had to shoo him out (now you know why he probably calls me "Asshole").

Good old Stompie. Must have been someone else under that table ...

Finally, I could tell Simone this story.

Stompie

Written by Harry Friedland in 2004

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