

Fowl Weather  
*By Michael Danese*

“Outta my way, vermin!” Silas yelled playfully. A small group of seagulls made a path for him to pass.

He was in his element, walking on the beach in the wee hours of the morning. The Sun will be up soon and he has a full head of steam.

Silas Tweed’s legs kept pumping. He has tread on this beach for almost all of his 62 years. He is about six feet tall, and in his younger days he was a bit of a jock, you know, high school football, swimming, and then tennis at the local club. For the past several years he has gotten a bit soft, and these “power walks” are his way of getting back into shape. But, the reality is, he just plain likes it!

Silas has had a life-long love affair with the beach, relishing every aspect of it; the waves, the sand, the shells, the crowded beaches, the dolphins, even the noisy, elbow to elbow boardwalk, with the constant smell of cotton candy, French fries and pizza, and it’s symphony of crying babies, screams from roller coasters, and the clanking of the kiddie rides. Yes, he loves it all, except, perhaps for the seagulls. But, who really likes seagulls? Do you? I didn’t think so.

Ever since he was a toddler his parents, and his grandparents for that matter, took him to this little town on the coast. It is several miles south of the big resort town, which his family avoided like the plague. *His* town is almost a secret – mostly residential, with a minimum of motels and hotels. They always rented the same house, two blocks off of the beach, three bedrooms, one bath, an outside shower, and a cozy front porch. Silas looked forward to this two-week escape from reality all year long. While sitting in school, opening Christmas presents, even while raking leaves, his head was at the beach.

As a child he spent countless hours at the beach chasing and shooing the seagulls away. It was a bit of a hobby, a lifelong mission, you might say.

As he grew older and had a family of his own, the tradition continued. The last two weeks of July was always beach time for him, his wife Kera, his daughter, Gertie, and son, Jaxon. As the kids grew older, beach time always included a friend for each, and then soon it was boyfriends, girlfriends, and then eventually spouses and grandchildren. Gertie and her husband Tom have a son, who they named Silas. Jaxon and his wife Jo have twin girls, Ali and Gwen.

Silas loved having the whole clan at the beach. And now he has his own modest house there. It's a little small, and a bit farther from the beach, but it is *his*, and they go there as much as they can. He also seemed to pass down the tradition of chasing the gulls, at least to the grandkids. The whole gull vs. Silas thing has always been somewhat of a family amusement. In fact, this past year on Father's Day, the grandchildren got him a new beach hat with fake seagull poop on it, and it said "Damn Seagulls!" on the front. He loved it and wore it proudly, to the hilarity of the toddlers.

Silas was also a magnet for lost children on the beach. He could spot a kid that's been separated from a parent at 500 feet. Gertie and Jaxon have retold the stories many times over about Silas finding a child, sometimes as young as two, approaching them carefully, easing their hysterics, then taking them by the hand to find the parents, who many times didn't even know that their child was lost. Parents who don't watch their kids on the beach have always been a pet peeve of his. Now, that feeling wasn't as strong as his disdain for seagulls, but pretty close.

On that Father's Day weekend he again spotted a poor crying child, a little Asian girl, probably about three years old. It turned out that the "Damn Seagulls" hat amused her right away, and she began to smile. He reunited her with her non-attention-paying mother in record time.

Silas retired two years ago, and since then Kira and Silas have spent a lot of time at the beach house. They've managed to stretch the season from early April through October. She enjoys the time by reading, shopping and scrapbooking. He is happy to fish and stroll the beach.

Now, on this particular weekend in early September, the town is nothing like the crowded busy time of that last Father's Day weekend. Not even close. The news media was all a-buzz this week with the coming of Hurricane Hilda. Hilda, it seems, is the first hurricane to crawl up the mid-Atlantic coast in a very long time, and the media is having their usual circus with it. Hilda slammed Cape Hatteras pretty hard, causing wide-spread damage and flooding. "So what else is new?" thought Silas.

When the evacuation notices and hurricane warnings were posted for his town, Silas decided to stay put. Kira was already out of town babysitting the twins. She pleaded with him to leave, but being the stubborn mule that he is, she knew it was a lost cause. Oh, sure, he moved all of the outdoor furniture into the garage, and cleared away everything that could become a missile in high winds. Silas has seen

numerous storms – Nor’easters and thunderstorms are regular visitors to this town. The worst ones usually decimate the beach – causing erosion and expensive replenishment. He was sure that this would be inevitable with Hilda.

The storm hit hard like a pool cue. The rain and wind were terrific and the streets were quickly flooded. He was happy that he was a few blocks from the beach, because the streets closer to the ocean were a lot worse. In the back of his mind he knew that staying was a bad idea, but, too late now! He lost power a few hours after the rain began. He was ready with several flashlights and kept a vigil, until his eyelids just got too heavy.

He didn’t get much sleep that night, but when he suddenly awoke before dawn, he knew that the storm was over. He sprung out of bed and quickly reached for the light. The power was still out. He grabbed a flashlight and surveyed his property. He started with the inside, and soon found that there wasn’t any damage. Outside he found several limbs on the ground and the trashcans and their contents were tossed all over the yard. The streets were saturated and flooded in several places. He noticed a house across the street with several pieces of siding ripped off. It was still pretty windy, balmy, actually. He was dying to see the beach!

As he marched towards the beach he was thinking about how the media always capitalizes on situations like this - sensationalizing the “what ifs” to the point of causing mass hysteria. All with the intent of keeping eyeballs glued to the screen. Perhaps it is a conspiracy between the media and the stores that sell milk and bread. Hurricanes or snowstorms, they both cause people to buy milk and bread like moths to the light. All tipped by the media panic mongers, as Silas calls them.

Within minutes he is on the beach, or what is left of it. The erosion lived up to its billing. At least forty percent of the beach was gone. There was a large drop-off between where the beach was to where the waves slammed the earth before the tide went out a bit. And the waves, oh, the waves were incredible, like Hollywood special effects. Silas thought that perhaps he was at the site of the surfing championships in Hawaii. Yet, there were no surfers to take advantage of the moving walls of water. He was all alone on the beach, except for a few seagulls.

He was walking north on the beach, with the waves on his right. A flock of gulls were standing in his path, all facing the ocean. “Scram, rats with wings!” he yelled as he walked through a large group of the black and mostly white birds. The birds flew a few feet or walked quickly out of his path.

The sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon. It was one of his favorite sites. It caused the sky to erupt in yellows, reds and purples as it bounced illumination off of the scattered clouds. "Back off, birds!" he yelled as he walked, just happy to be there.

Silas walked several blocks more. "Blocks" was his way of measuring distance on the beach, using the ends of the streets on his left as markers. He was getting a little tired and remembered that he didn't get much sleep. He turned around and began his return trip. This direction was a little tougher to walk, since he was now walking into the balmy wind. But he rambled along, shooing the birds as usual.

Again he came upon the large flock of gulls. "Move along, scavengers!" he yelled. But they barely noticed him, in fact, it seemed like they moved towards him a little.

"Outta my way, scum eaters!" he screamed at them.

This time, they weren't going to take it.

Suddenly he felt something hit him on the back of his head. In a flash he turned his head to see a large gull flying away. He quickly felt his head. Blood. Not much, it was just a small cut, but it caused him to erupt. "You worthless beggar birds!" He shouted as he waved his arms and ran into the flock. Quickly two more birds flew at him and pecked his head; then two more. Silas was still yelling and waving his arms. When three more did the same, he began to panic.

Within seconds the flock was on him, pecking at him as he ran. He lost his balance, fell to the ground, then quickly jumped to his feet and ran. Blood ran into his eyes. He tried to wipe it as he ran. The birds were relentless, they took turns dive-bombing and pecking him.

Several of the birds landed direct hits in his eyes. He fell again in the shallow surf, again he jumped to his feet and blindly ran. He ran directly into a large wave that was breaking. It swallowed him, then slammed him to the ground, then turned him over. The salt water stung his oozing cuts, but he pushed on. He got his footing and ran again. Another wave pummeled him. The water was deeper now. When he came to the surface, he began to swim. He was thankful that he was still a good swimmer, for someone his age anyway. The birds showed him no mercy, pecking at his face and eyes as he tried to blindly swim.

He swam for a few seconds and went over a monster wave before it broke. He heard the thunderous clap as it broke behind him. It was then he realized he was

swimming the wrong way. At that moment a rip tide grabbed him and flung him far from the shore. The more he tried to fight it the further from the land it carried him.

Silas spent his final breath trying to fight the angry sea and the birds. He finally closed his blurred, bloody eyes and slipped under the water.

The next day the newly-widowed Kera was sitting on her front porch reading the local paper. The headline said, "*Hurricane Claims a Single Victim*" She sat there sobbing in the silence. The only sound was the occasional *caw, caw* from the gulls.

C 2011 – Michael Danese