

The presence of the sea in Port Aransas became hypnotic. By slouching down in a dining room chair and looking through the balcony rails, slightly over the dunes, I could see the tides roll in on the pitch of rough waters and turn muddy brown from disturbing the sands.

Upstairs, crosswise on the bed, lying prone with a pillow for a chin prop, the vista opened above the suntan-colored dunes, far out into peppered patterns shaded and cut by light into gunmetal gray ripples.

The effect goes deep. I might be so mesmerized by the winds increasing or rain lashing against the storm windows that my voice became soft whispers, the way we once talked hunting wild turkeys or stalking deer. Tones so soft, my pal only glanced up from reading a book or making notes.

Under breath, or close to so, posing later in front of the storm window on my version of sea legs, I say: "Rust red tanker in northeastern position, her flag invisible in the pitch of her decks." Then: "She's true to course, bound for the wild Atlantic and seas beyond." Then blurt: "Ahoy! I'm Monte Noelke from Mertzon, a hopeless gawd-a-mighty groundling, a fourth generation herder, and a licensed pickup driver for all the land mass of the very state of

Texas." And then close to sotto voce: "Sixteen men on a dead man's chest, ho-ho and a bottle of rum."

After hearing the old song "Barnacle Bill The Sailor" as a mere lad, I yearned to be the adventurer the Big Boss followed in the Merchant Marine onto the present day, envying a grandson who sails to and from exotic ports and mystic islands on the Mediterranean, to be sung love songs by scores of beautiful girls in five of the six language roots known on that foreign coast. Instead, the most naive old sister, the joke of Granny Brown's quilting bee, could single me from the hall full of hombres as a 1928 model herder from southeast of Barnhart, as commonplace as the center stripe down the highways.

Once told you how on a Saturday afternoon on Sixth Street in Austin, a huge brute of a man came ramming his way through the packed sidewalks, carrying a gallon jug of wine by hooking his finger in the ring to steady the bounty on his shoulder.

Rap music blasted from doorways. Pedestrian traffic overflowed off the curbs in unsteady motion. The giant somehow recessed long enough from his insanity to say, "Am-ah sheep rancher from Idaho - Howdy, feller."

One recurring dream that originated after buying a navy blue hat in a yacht supply outfit in Norfolk, Virginia

continues to be a bother. The hat spoke class – high class. The brim, creased in a soft slope in front, accentuated the blue pigment of my eyes; the brim turned down in back hinted of a sport's air.

But the dream part enlarged to a swaggerer making a grandiose entrance at a Virginia horse sale, decked in gray British tweeds, a starched white oxford shirt set off by a blue polkadot bow tie, plus the new blue hat. All the character lacked to be mistaken for an English duke over to ol' Virginia to buy a stallion in the whole dream, popped up in the form of one 200-pound, big-mouth lady sitting in the box seats, who shouted to her companion, "I do believe that's Little Sonnie Noelke from Mertzon, Texas." (Monte is my pen name. My real name used to be "Little Sonnie Noelke." Keep the little stuff in confidence, please. And while you are at it, drop the "Sonnie," too.)

Exhausted from the act, and needing to give my pal privacy, I broke from the condo outdoors dressed in nondescript beach clothes under a floppy travel hat to walk among combers dressed in nondescript beach clothes and floppy travel hats. But the big difference was that the gulls fled from my path; they clustered and followed, or ignored, the other people.

On one spot, 44 gulls congregated on a square piece of sand. Gulls are not territorial. They are scavenging, seekers and seizers of all circumstances. Yet, staked out on this plat, an easy 50 people walked by without disturbing a feather, until I dispersed the whole flock on approach — made them fly.

The gulls might have been surprised, but I wasn't. In Yellowstone Park, a camp-spoiled pet coyote broke to run at my sight. In Santa Fe, a flight of insipid, trash-raiding, black-hearted crows took off before my car door slammed near their perch on a transmission wire.

Think back from the bleary-eyed Austin guy to the gulls on the Gulf — a lanolin or dead wool aroma must give signals. I flushed those gulls every morning. I know it was intuition in all cases, but I don't know why, as I haven't fired a shot in months and more months.