

Brooklyn

by [Kirby Olson](#) (April 2019)



Coney Island from Brighton Pier, John Henry Twachtman, 1880

Crawling across the southern highway at the bottom of Brooklyn, I saw a sign for Coney Island. It took a half hour to find a place to park. The meter was broken which meant we saved eight quarters. Coney Island was originally an island full of rabbits that the Dutch called conies. Thousands of people line up for screeching car rides that zoom up and down, with ferocious hard rock accompaniment. You can pay a dollar to see a woman who is half-snake. A tiny horse is kept in a glass case and you can pay a dollar to see it. We went in. The horse was small.

A crummy bathroom that you had to pay a dollar to visit was next. My wife was mad, but paid the dollar.

“Kirby, it’s disgusting!” She said.

“You mean the price, or the conditions?”

“Both!”

Falstaff went on a train ride that looped around, and he delighted in steering the engine. Then he got a boat that went around in a circle. He rode on a careening rocket next.

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As we left we walked on a clean boardwalk. The ocean was off to one side, and to the other, carnival barkers. They had no teeth, and deep wrinkles, and were hardened by years of pleasure-seeking, but still had a soft smile for children. Nathan’s Hot Dogs cost seven dollars. We went without, and ate Graham Crackers in the car as we went up Flatbush Ave., where I announced we would have to see a crazy dwarf tree, the Camperdown Elm.

“No way!” Falstaff screamed.

“Yes,” I said.

“Kirby, I can’t move,” my wife said. “I’ll sit in the car, and sleep.”

I didn’t know if it was safe. I parked under the shade along Flatbush Ave.

“Are you coming, Falstaff?” I asked.

“You should go, Falstie,” Riikka said.

Falstaff’s little hand in mine we ran across the avenue, and looked at the tree. Some deep mystery lay in it. We walked up through the park, across a long meadow. When Olmsted and Vaux first designed Prospect Park, they wanted it to contain the values that the north had fought for in the Civil War. The Long Meadow represented peace, but also beauty, and a sense of dignity, and perhaps the hereafter. Wasn’t the Civil War fought for human dignity? Southerners claimed then, and some still claim, it was about their freedom, their freedom to own slaves. My blood boiled. We went through an Alpine pass that a sign said the British had tried to take in the Revolutionary War. Falstaff was sitting on my hip, reading the sign.

“Dad, it says there was a battle here. Why are there battles?”

“People fight to keep the world large,” I said.

“What’s wrong with being small?”

“Nothing,” I said. “People sacrifice themselves for their children.”

“What is sacrifice?”

“It’s when you are willing to die for your children.”

Falstaff went silent as we walked through the pass in which 3000 American men sacrificed their lives so their children could have rights. 1000 died directly in the battle, when they were caught in a British pincer movement. Another two thousand died on prisoner of war ships that the British kept on the East River. The rights outlined in the Bill of Rights, written by five-foot-tall James Madison, included freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, freedom of worship, and other freedoms well-worth dying for. I wondered if I could explain these to Falstaff. We traipsed through shady trees. I tried to untangle the concepts that held the western world together, and harder to do it as I walked uphill. They were covered with the underbrush of spurious anti-Lockean arguments that incensed me, but which Olmsted had understood, and had done his best to illustrate. We walked through an Alpine area. The hillside was surrounded with fencing to keep people off the delicate grass and flowers. Plants did not have rights, exactly, but they should have a right not to be trampled. There were mysterious basins that did not contain water. Children bicycled in these basins in an area called The Vale of Cashmere. Gays used the woods for trysts.

Falstaff's cheek nestled in the curve between my shoulder and my chest. I half-hoped his eyes would close, but they were bulbous with wonderment, and irritation, and only somewhere in the background was there a hint of sleep.

"Dad, what is sacrifice again?"

"It's when someone gives something up for his children or for someone else. It's like when you're at Playschool and another kid wants a toy. You give it to him, putting your satisfaction to one side."

"Isn't that appeasement?" He asked. "On the History Channel they said giving Czechoslovakia to Hitler was appeasement. Winston Churchill said appeasement solves nothing."

"Sometimes a sacrifice is a surrender of oneself for a greater principle, and sometimes it's appeasement."

"At Sunday School they said Jesus sacrificed himself for us children."

"Yes, he gave his life so that we could live forever in Paradise."

“What is Paradise?”

“It’s a place where we will have perfect bodies, and be able to move on steeds of quicksilver, like seraphim.”

“Will we have bigger bodies?”

“We will look like cherubim rather than seraphim. Heaven will look like the Long Meadow we’re now walking in. It won’t hurt our knees so much to walk uphill because we will be able to fly.”

He put his head on my shoulder. My arms ached, and my legs ached, and my back ached, and my head hurt, and my knees were on fire, but I wanted him to see the park. We went across Long Meadow, a mile-long stretch of grass that represented the end of the Civil War, and also an opening into heaven for the principles of equality that Lincoln had espoused. It was a point of communication between two worlds. I walked its length, then set Falstaff down.

“Falstaff, I will race you to the end of the meadow.”

He ran looking back, petulant when I gained on him. We went past the Picnic House, and toward the northernmost point of the park. We sat down on the grass, and looked back at the open meadow, glorious in the afternoon sun as evening’s golden hour began to kindle a lovely hue in the Osage Oranges. Was this heaven itself?

I got out a chocolate bar and handed it to Falstaff. It melted but he ate it, licking the coconut interior, then put it in the grass for an ant to share. The ant's antennae went nuts. It ran around quickly, and soon there were many ants on the bar. I took Falstaff's hand, and we walked some more.

"Come on, honey," I said. "I want to see the plaza and the war memorials."

"Dad, am I a communist? I wanted to share with the ants."

"Maybe. You should be careful with that impulse. It's dangerous. Liberals want to share everything, and that can mean suicide, if you gave away everything that you own. Conservatives want to keep what they have to give to their own children, and that, too, can be a little mean."

We came to the Memorial Arch at Grand Army Plaza. Upon the arch were famous bronze statues of men in war formation. Some were getting shot, others crawled for help, others fought on. They had been sculpted by a man named Macmonnies. On top of the arch was an absurd chariot driven by a war-like Valkyrie, and four horses pulled the coach. A small statue of John Kennedy stood on the Plaza, dwarfed by the immense arch.

"Who's that? And why's he wearing clothes like us?" Falstaff asked.

“He was shot by a communist for spreading freedom,” I told Falstaff. “He hated Cuba, a communist country, and got killed by a communist nut who had visited Cuba.”

“Why are there so many statues about people who died in war?” Falstaff asked.

“Christ on his cross reminds us that the communists are reprobates. All statues in America are about how good people fought against creeps.”

“Can we help creeps become good people?” Falstaff asked.

“They are like zombies in zombie movies. They think they are all about love, but love like theirs nobody wants. They’re like molesters.”

“Isn’t the statue in Delhi with the lady on top of the tower like this one?”

“She is the spirit of individual liberty,” I said. “She is our nation’s highest ideal.”

“What’s an ideal?”

“The thing we care about most.”

"I'd put candy on top of a monument," Falstaff said.

"What if you had all the candy in the world, but it was creepy candy from a molester?"

"What is a molester, again?"

"Someone who gives you candy, but who is like the witch in Hansel and Gretel. She actually wants to eat your body, and is using the candy as enticement."

"Every time you answer, I have five more questions."

"What else do you want to ask?"

"Could I still eat the candy?"

"Yes, but it might get you killed."

I remembered my wife in the boiling car. I hailed a series of taxis. None stopped. My fascinations took me off course.

“Falstaff, do you want to race me back through the meadow?” I asked.

“No.”

We walked, me carrying him a few minutes, then him walking for a few. We talked about liberty, freedom and God.

“Who is Jesus again?” He asked.

“God.”

“He’s all-powerful?”

“Yup.”

“Why does he die then?”

“He doesn’t die,” I said. “He lives. He also promised that we won’t die, either. Plus, we get to have a body like his when we die, and can walk on water.”

“Does Jesus like communists?”

“No, he hates them, because they kill anyone who doesn’t think like them.”

“But didn’t he like to share with his disciples?” He asked.

“Communists deserve to be killed,” I said. “They don’t believe in liberty. They don’t let people say what they want, and they take away all the toys, and lock them up. Their candy tastes like poop. Jesus shared, but only out of love. Communists share things, only in order to get more power over us. They are sick, like the witch in Hansel and Gretel.”

“I don’t want to kill the witch,” Falstaff said.

“You have to,” I said. “Remember, witches are bad. If you won’t kill her, she will kill you. You can’t reason with witches.”

“Well, I like to share.”

“It’s ok to share with your own family. Communism within families is fine. Just don’t share with strangers. You never know if strangers really care about you, or if they have ulterior motives.”

I could see his mouth repeating “ulterior motives,” but

decided it was his job to figure it out via the context unless he asked.

We walked past the zoo, and looked in. A giraffe's head stood over a gate. A monkey chattered in the background. The roar of some beast made trees tremble. We walked past a very old stone house. I thought about the Founding of the Republic, and about Alexander Hamilton's economic ideas. Jefferson wanted a nation of gentleman farmers. Hamilton wanted a mixed economy, part industrial, part farm, part trading. Thank goodness Hamilton prevailed. I disliked Episcopalians, but he had been Episcopalian. I tried to make my ideas line up. It hurt. Finally we got back to my wife and the car.

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"Kirby, where have you been? It's been an hour. I have to go to the bathroom!" She screamed.

"Why didn't you go?" I asked.

"I didn't know where," she said.

"The zoo is right there."

"I'm not an animal!" She howled.

I took her to the public library, and we circled the block until she came out. We then drove over the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan, across Houston Street, turned toward the World Trade Center, and parked.

The rubble had been replaced by a statue. I couldn't make out what they were building.

"Dad, what happened here?" Falstaff asked.

"Don't tell him," my wife whispered.

"People who hate freedom smashed into the building and killed 3000 Americans," I said. "It's not something we should be ashamed about," I whispered to Riikka.

"It's not appropriate to be showing him places where people got killed," she said.

We took a taxi to Battery Park and I showed Falstaff the Statue of Liberty out in the harbor. We took a Staten Island Ferry and glided past the statue, past Paris Island, where our soldiers practiced. I showed Falstaff the soldiers marching in a row.

"Falstaff, our country exists because of soldiers who were willing to sacrifice themselves for freedom. In the Battle Hymn of the Republic, it says,

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,

With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:

As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,

While God is marching on!

"That's sick." Riikka said.

"Love for freedom is sick?" I asked.

"Kirby, can you be quiet?" My wife asked.

"We have to teach him about America," I said. "The World Trade Center will become a monument to the western way of life, and the values we hold dear. Memorial Plaza will be a one-acre waterfall with citizens throwing money into a wish pool. Capitalism is not something to be ashamed about. It is freedom of the market, and all that."

"All what?" Falstaff asked.

My Finnish wife stared out the window of the taxi as we went to get our car out of the lot, and then drove out the Lincoln Tunnel, and began the glide up Palisades Highway back into the less cluttered life we led in the Catskills, as darkness brightened the lights of the city.

I thought to myself about future trips. Lincoln and John Brown at the New York Historical Society? We had missed them. We had missed climbing the Statue of Liberty. What about seeing the pharaohs at the Brooklyn Museum? If we lived in the city, Falstaff could learn about all the sacrifices patriots had made from the time of Moses to our own day.

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