

DC in Summer

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



P St Washington DC, John Gerachis, 1962

No sooner had we buried my father, than another citizen was trying to be born. We left College Park and drove to the exit for Route 66 to Virginia. The baby would allow us to put a down payment on a house. I thought of Joseph's brothers. Although it was a desperate situation it wasn't quite as bad as Joseph's. We were renting a house in the Catskills. The rent went up every two years while my salary flatlined. We

could buy the house and our son Falstaff would have his own home. We could customize it, my wife said. We could put in a sauna.

Four lanes crowded into two. A flashing sign told us to MERGE LEFT. The air conditioner groaned like emphysema. In the front seat, the trickle of cool air tickled. Mari and I giggled. The child's hair glistened. Falstaff saw the long row of tail-lights slowing before us. Falstaff was teasing a kid in a nearby car by sticking out his tongue, stretching his ears, and then giving him the middle finger. The other kid was tapping his mother on the shoulder.

Falstaff said, "Dad, when we get to the hotel can we go swimming?"

"Yes," I said. "Stop giving that kid the finger. The parent might have a gun."

Mari broke out sandwiches. I pulled the cellophane back and took a bite. Dry bread with a slice of cheese and a pickle was made into an experience when Mari made it. Mari had taste. She always looked terrific, and paid attention to externals. I was trapped in the meaning of things, and rarely left my head for more than a second. I looked clean but rumpled. The traffic was parked with a sudden lurch followed by more waiting. We had 18 miles to go, and were traveling at 15 miles per hour. Finally we emerged from the bottleneck 54 minutes later. Time equals rate times distance, I told Falstaff.

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He said, "Dad, no more lessons. You promised."

I saw the sign for Springhill Suites. We exited. I pulled up under the triangular entranceway of the hotel and unloaded. Mari went into the lobby with Falstaff. It was raining, so I ran into the hotel with last month's *Mensa Digest* over my head. I had been in Mensa since the fourth grade, but not on the strength of my math skills. It was my vocabulary.

We went up to room 324. The Marriott ethos had been underwritten by the golden rule of do unto others. In terms of aesthetics it ranked high. This was reflected in the price. I didn't want to pay a tip to the bellboy so I walked past him pretending I didn't see him. I tucked Falstaff in my right arm, and had a small suitcase in my left and a bag of theology books between my teeth.

The suite had a double-bed and a pull-out couch. The general color scheme was rose. At the far right was the sink in white marble and the shower room continued the white marble motif. We called room service and had them push two beds together and brace them against the wall so Falstaff wouldn't fall as he slept between us. We had them open the sofa couch and put on fresh linen so that we didn't pick up diseases from all the Senators with replaceable interns in the actual bed. Falstaff dressed for swimming. He kept one eye on *Spongebob* dancing around on *Cartoon Network*.

We went to the swimming pool with Falstaff skipping in his swimsuit. I inserted the room card into the door lock next to the swimming pool. We talked to a lifeguard studying Bulgarian who said he wanted to be in the CIA. He told us that the pool was going to be open for one hour.

I asked how deep the shallow end was.

"Three feet and six inches," the lifeguard said.

"You are too short," I informed Falstaff.

“Could you just hold him and put his feet in?” I asked the lifeguard.

He put his book down. I opened my book on John Locke.

“Come here, little fella,” he said.

He looked like he was going to do it.

“Daddy, you’re a liar,” Falstaff said. “You promised we could go swimming *together!*”

I didn’t remember the word *together*. I turned to the lifeguard. The pool area had two other customers. I had at least twenty books I wanted to read.



“This man is studying Bulgarian.” I informed Falstaff. “He’s going to be a spy. He has no time for your nonsense, Falstaff.”

“Who cares if he’s studying Bulgarian!” Falstaff yelled.

The man stared. The man walked Falstaff around the pool wetting his limbs to cool him off after the long hot drive. I wished I could get in, but couldn’t stand cold, and I had important books to read. I sat down on the edge of the pool and leaned back, dipping my toes. I studied Falstaff and his helper. My lips were blue and my teeth chattered. I put away the Locke book, and I opened *Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty*, by Mattes.

There was one other father with a boy younger than mine. I saw a stream of urine jet from the boy’s pants into the clear water. Ever since Obama said that anyone could go into any bathroom they wished, the problem had gone viral. Urine Nation had become the ruination of the nation. Could

Trump change it back?

I lost any appetite I might have had for swimming.

I took Falstaff back up the elevator to his mother.

Mari distributed yogurt and cookies. I climbed on the bed to look through a tourist brochure about the Smithsonian. I noticed Falstaff was loading up the microwave. The microwave was placed at the kid's exact reaching height of three feet and six inches, and he had thrown my wallet in there along with the TV remote, popped the door closed and pushed start. I leaped off the bed to retrieve the smoking items.

The smell of burnt plastic pervaded the room.

As I rinsed my credit cards in cool water Falstaff jumped around. I sensed something demonic in the sulfurous air around the boy. Perhaps he was becoming a Democrat? He wanted money to burn?

The phone rang. I leaped. The prospective parent indicated he would be waiting at a restaurant called *Carrabba's Italian Grill* a couple minutes down Trinity Parkway. I tucked Falstaff in with his mother. I kissed her and Falstaff goodnight, and went to the car. The Parkway had a strip of unnaturally bright green grass down the center.

The All-Star game with its steroid-enhanced players was on the plasma TV as I walked into *Carrabba's* and spotted the prospective parent. He ordered a lobster and a *Bud Lite*. I ordered a meatless spaghetti and a *Sprite*. The pretty waitress spotted me and brought a menu. It was hard to make conversation as the client asked if I was interested in the ballgame. I said no. Sports were Republican, and Christian, but I hated football, because I hated contact sports. It gave other people a license to touch, and I couldn't see the faces of the players, so I found it difficult to synch emotionally

with them. I tried to finish the *Sprite* to indicate the dinner was over so I could get back to my room so as to snuggle with the wife but the waitress sprang out of nowhere to refill the drink. I had been brought up to finish everything. The drink was endless. I kept trying to finish. My whole idea was to argue that I had been open to the idea of a baby from some other human in my wife, but I was not going to allow it. I would find a technicality, and thus argue I had been open-minded, and yet, scotch the whole thing.

“Norm, you gotta relax,” the prospective parent said.

He pushed me playfully. I didn't like being touched, and people have no idea how often they touch. He said his name, but I forgot. Rich people who want to impregnate my wife made me mad, but I needed to pretend to be tolerant. What did he want from me? I thought again of Joseph and his brothers. The mercantilization of human flesh . . . I was restless and when I did get back to the hotel to sleep I snored so Mari pushed me out of the sofa bed and I fell. I tried but I couldn't get back to sleep. I stared at the ceiling. How had the country gone so wrong? Ethics had gone out the window with the window.

The next morning at breakfast I took the TV remote downstairs and in the hustle of the breakfast room I exchanged it for an unmelted one. That done, I settled into breakfast. From left to right there were yogurts, cereals, fruits, scrambled eggs, juices, sausages and waffles. I scanned for oat meal, which is the only thing I can eat, as I have gluten problems. I couldn't find anything much to eat. I found a blackened banana and ate select parts. *Mensa Digest*. “Many Geniuses Underemployed,” one headline read.

The room was packed full of Asian tourists on a bus tour. They left their dishes piled on the tables when they left. A sign said they were to bring their trays to the trash.

They couldn't read plain English. Mari brought six yogurts, and went through three of them. I kept waiting to see if they were going to refill the oatmeal cooker. Folks dined on mountains of sausage. It annoyed me that the flesh of the sausage had belonged to happy pigs such as the one in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. I loved pigs. I hated sausage. The moist slippery skin slid around in mouths on a cushion of grease. They washed it down with cranberry juice, and tucked in for more. I asked for a packet of oatmeal, and got three. I tucked into the oatmeal after pouring hot water on it, and diced up some fruit. The kid was restless. Our appointment at the clinic was imminent.

It was a hot morning. We crawled through the traffic on Old Lee Highway. We arrived at the stucco building and sat down to talk with a doctor in a white coat. My wife explained that the baby would be our flesh. She would be carrying our own baby, and the genetics also had to be approved by the buyer. I almost understood the details. I wanted to pretend this wasn't happening. I looked at the 6000-gallon aquarium and the fish gliding around without apparent moral qualms and without wondering where they could get money for a down payment for a house. They didn't have to think how would they pay for their child's education. A fish has a memory of eight seconds. A yellow fish with a trumpet for a nose darted gracefully around thumbing its nose at us.

The doctor was beckoning with a curling finger. I walked into a room and was shown a video cassette, and a small plastic bottle.

"The geneticist wants to see if your sperm has any normal-bodied constituents, Norm," he said, and closed the door behind him.

I snapped on the video. A man and a woman in prison outfits came on and were slapping each other around and talking rough and soon he was doing her up against the wall.

She was egging him on to use a little more force. The force was verbal. I closed the cap on the plastic bottle and brought the sample to the technician.

My wrist was sore from being pushed out of bed the previous night but I had managed. We left the stucco building and climbed into the steaming van after being advised that my sperm count was not stellar.

“Most men supply a virtual megalopolis of semen,” the doctor intoned. “You, however, have supplied us with a small village, and many of the inhabitants have deformities. I wouldn’t go so far as to say you’re infertile. We could comb through your village and find some sport.”

I tuned him out. He had a paisley tie with a checkered shirt. Very loud. Probably Democrat. Had I made it clear that I wanted them to find an NBA-sized sperm cell swimming improbably amidst the average denizens of my testicles?

“It takes a village, as the saying goes,” the man said, noticing my discomfort, “But even a lunar village has to have a mayor.”



The doctor came back in an hour and said that there were many possible children in my sperm sample. Now, I just needed to sign the form, and they would insert the sperm into my wife’s womb, and we would be in business. I would not sign. The whole idea was an outrage. I would sell my own flesh and blood to someone I didn’t even know in exchange for a house? I wanted to kill somebody. We pulled out of the lot in the purple van and found the highway and went at a clip of 85 on a clear lane straight into Washington DC and found free parking in front of the *National Museum of Natural History*.

A mammoth elephant stood before us as we went into

the building, a daughter by one side, as they wrapped their trunks around each other's. Tickets were free. We went through the dinosaurs. Falstaff was running beside his mother. She wasn't talking. It had been very hot outside, but soon we walked through the Ice Age. Polar bears, walruses, and arctic fox. In African Cultures, I spotted a pygmy tarsier who had lived in Madagascar. The sign said they were related to humanity some seven million years back. Falstaff was trying to climb into the exhibit.

I pulled him down and focused on the pygmy tarsier. The sign said it weighed as much as a dime. The creature is not a monkey the sign said, but a primate. It had thin ears like a bat, and bulbous eyes a third of the size of the face, and a nose like a mouse. Falstaff ran behind a pillar and poked his face out and stretched his ears. Mari and I laughed.

The prospective parent was standing by the Mammals Shop. He was loaded with money, which is the only thing that separated him from us. That, and he wanted to rent my wife's womb and purchase my child. We went up the steps to a special exhibit on Greenland. Behind one case were magical talismen called Tupiak which were used by Greenlanders to visit disasters upon the wealthy. That seemed useful.

We went into a café in the Smithsonian and got mint ice cream and cookies. Falstaff hated museums.

"My feet hurt." Falstaff informed me.

The parent said, "My feet hurt, too. Let's go over to National Museum of American History."

"No more museums," Falstaff said.

Everyone pretended not to hear him.

We found Julia Child's kitchen and inspected the knife-wielding celebrity's laboratory. It had been built by

her husband. Elaborate torture instruments lined the walls. I fought the urge to faint. I remembered Julia Child's exclamation of "Bon Appetit!" I gazed at the aquamarine cabinets, the copper pots and pans, and the array of butcher knives.

Falstaff couldn't understand why we were looking at somebody's kitchen. I explained she had been on television.

"Like Emeril?" Falstaff asked.

The child watched Emeril on the Food TV station. He watched in real time as chicken was made into a specialty dish garnished with broccoli. Mari remained silent. Julia Child had many small portraits of cats around the kitchen.

The oven was large enough to cook a mammoth. On the wall around the plexiglass-enclosed kitchen were highlights of Child's life. Her marriage appeared to be long-lasting, although they could not have children. This explained the length to which she went in preparing dinner. She took out her frustrations mincing small creatures.

"Dad, I'm hungry," Falstaff said.

We went into the café and ordered more mint chocolate chip ice cream and cookies. The prospective parent paid.

We walked out and drove over to the Lincoln Memorial. Armed guards informed us we would have to park a half mile's distance because of the possibility of car bombs.

It took us over an hour to return. We then walked up to the Lincoln Monument. Falstaff pointed at Lincoln and asked, "Is he God?"



We were walking behind the monument to an elevator

that would take us up into the sculpture area. We didn't want to walk up the massive steps. Behind the monument was a panoramic display that explained the events of the Civil War. I saw a picture of Jefferson Davis.

"There's the bad man!" I pointed at Jefferson Davis.

"Why does he look so nice?" Falstaff asked.

I read the Gettysburg Address silently as it had been engraved on the wall. My eyes brimmed with tears. Engraved on the wall, it said:

FOURSCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO, OUR FATHERS BROUGHT FORTH ON THIS CONTINENT A NEW NATION, CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY, AND DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL
. . .

And ended:

. . . WE HERE HIGHLY RESOLVE THAT THESE DEAD SHALL NOT HAVE FOUGHT IN VAIN, THAT THIS NATION, UNDER GOD, SHALL HAVE A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM, AND THAT GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE, SHALL NOT PERISH FROM THIS EARTH.

NOVEMBER 19, 1863

The prospective parent took out his camera and asked my family to stand in front of Lincoln. My wife suddenly perked up. He snapped a picture and emailed it to us. We went into the monument shop and I bought a book of Abraham Lincoln's Civil War prose. Lincoln had been a Republican.

"Norm, I want another child," Mari complained. "One is not enough. At least give me the experience of having another baby in my womb. I need it. I know it's expensive, but not only will we not keep it, we will make money on it!"

I pretended I didn't hear her. As we came back, I looked up at

the monument again. According to the brochure I picked up—the Greek Doric temple was made out of Indiana limestone and the statue from Georgia marble. The back of Lincoln’s head contained the outline of Robert E. Lee’s face. The sculpture was done by a man named Daniel Chester French, based on photographs by Matthew Brady. Congress set aside money for a monument in 1867 but it had not been completed until 1922. On August 28, 1963—a hundred years exactly from the year that Lincoln had given the Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech before one million people. One can see the Lincoln Memorial on the back of the penny, and also on the back of the five-dollar bill.

We took the elevator back down and went to Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Memorial*. An older woman rubbed a relative’s name on to a sheet of paper using a lead pencil.

“What’s she doing?” Falstaff asked.

“We fought a war against Asian communists,” I told Falstaff. “Communists are people who try to take over Wal-Marts and other companies and they make people work for nothing and there’s nothing inside their stores except sandy toilet paper. They are slavers, like the Confederates.”

“Daddy, that’s horrible,” Falstaff said.

“Your daddy’s right,” the older woman said. “Communists enslaved my husband in Vietnam and made him work in a rice paddy for beans.”

“How come?” Falstaff asked.

“Communists enslave people, like Democrats,” the older woman replied.

“Dad, why’s she crying?” Falstaff asked.

“Commies worked her husband to death.”

I tried to enter his six-year old mind.

"Falstaff," I said, "Communism is slavery."

"Daddy!" Falstaff said. "What is slavery?"

We walked for a while.

"It's when the government owns the people." I answered. "They are like parents, and never let the children grow up. The government is supposed to work for the people, but the communists turn it around. They want to own the people, by pushing them around, using the government as a weapon!"

"Dad, are you a communist?" Falstaff asked.

I realized that my definition would have to wait until Falstaff was a little older. I tried to translate it into kid language.

"Communists eat dog poop," I said.

"I don't like communists," Falstaff said.

I noticed a bearded young man walking beside us. His t-shirt said Oberlin College. On his bluejeans was the A with a circle around it that indicated anarchism. Also, he had a nose ring. He looked at Falstaff, and then at me.

"Her husband was an American imperialist," he said to my son. "How would you like it if Vietnamese people came here and put a gun to your head and told you how to live? Would you like that? When you grow up, you should join Antifa."

"Lockean liberalism is universal," I said to Falstaff. "Ignore this man."

"Locke might have been a universalist who wanted life, health, liberty and property for all. However, property

is problematic because it can't be held equally, and it leads to hierarchy. Should it be held by individuals who are entitled to hog it, as Locke says? Or should it be redistributed? The Vietnamese wanted to share," the intrusive jerk told my son.

"Communists don't share power," I said. "Ho shared food, but not power. Without faction, you do not have freedom. Freedom is more important than the crummy peace you creeps want."

He said, "What's the use?" rolled his eyes at me so that my son could see, and walked away.

"Where to?" I asked the creep who wanted to rent my wife's womb and own my next child.

We went into *Friendly's*. The menu had a club sandwich in the foreground, and a bacon cheeseburger in the middle ground, and in the distance was a caramel parfait ice cream with hot fudge and cherries. French fries girded the club sandwich as if they were fortifications from the Civil War. A bayonet in the form of a toothpick was stuck in the sandwich. Back in the days of bayonets the bigger guys had advantages. Today the machine gun was the equalizer. I looked through the menu and they had salads. The Chicken Caesar Salad read, "Treat yourself to grilled chicken atop crisp romaine and crunchy croutons tossed in our zesty Caesar dressing with a special blend of three flavorful cheeses. \$7.69." I pored through the offerings. There was a Fruit & Walnut Medley Salad which read, "So many distinctive flavors in one wonderful salad. Mandarin oranges, sweet glazed walnuts, red onions, Craisins and crumbled Blue cheese, all atop a bed of mixed field greens. Served with our new low-fat raspberry walnut vinaigrette. \$6.99." The photo that accompanied this offering revealed an army of Mandarin orange sections marching toward the palate on a sea of lettuce and Craisins™. I ordered an iced tea. I was nervous about gluten, and what else they might

put in these fanciful concoctions.

The Hunka Chunka PB Fudge Sundae™ was only \$3.99. The child ordered that, as did Mari. An hour later we left *Friendly's* with the idea that Dali (the name of the prospective parent) would visit us in Calcutta over the weekend. Mari and Dali discussed details. We could see how he performed in a domestic setting. We got on the road about five o'clock with a six-hour trip that went through Gettysburg. At Gettysburg, I stopped. On that battlefield the principle of equality had been established at the cost of 27,000 Union casualties in early July, 1863.

We walked to a place called the Peach Orchard. The particulars of the battle escaped me, but I knew that the essential was that the armies wrangled over the question of slavery. My memory faded as I looked over the habitat's immense landscape with fortifications. I read the inscriptions on the monuments.

Up over my shoulder was Seminary Ridge. On that ridge was the nation's first Lutheran seminary, established by an abolitionist named Samuel Schmucker in 1826. It was a command post held by first the Northern and then Southern troops during the battle. I read on a sign that the Confederates had burned Schmucker's papers when they had been in command of the buildings, but that later after the war the first African-American Lutheran pastor had been educated at that site. Later on, the first female pastor. What about the first dwarf? Has there even been a Lutheran dwarf for pastor? The passage against dwarf ordination in Leviticus had never been quite lifted. I wanted to walk up and see if there was anything left of the building and pay my respects, but there was the heat to consider. Falstaff was small, so maybe he could get excited about dwarves. He was the smallest in his kindergarten class. Mari and I weren't tiny, and certainly weren't dwarves, but of all the people in God's creation, it was they to whom I cottoned most among all the pretenders of

victimization. I saw them as a cause. I sometimes was incensed that all the presidents had been tall. Although I supported Trump, I was aware that the reason he had been picked is that he was simply taller than Hillary. Throughout history, the tall had prospered at the expense of the short. It seemed unfair. I was one inch above the national norm of 5'9", but because I played basketball as a hobby, I was very angry about height. I wanted equality of opportunity, and that was denied in the NBA to the short and even to the average. The average height in the NBA was 6'9". That was one foot higher than the national average. The people of North Korea were only about 5'5" because of drastic famines. How could their country continue to sell them the idea of equality when none in that country could make it to the NBA even if their dictator had imported Dennis Rodman to train their national team?

In the Peach Orchard, I found a monument and read the inscription to Falstaff. The memorial depicted two Confederate soldiers from something called Barksdale's Brigade. One of the soldiers, standing, protects a fallen comrade with his musket. The monument appeared to glorify the Confederacy. The inscription began, "On this ground our brave sires fought for their righteous cause . . . "

"What does it say, Dad?" Falstaff inquired.

The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863 had been given and then Martin Luther King had made Civil Rights speeches, and yet here the Confederate cause was described as "righteous." In 1865 the 13th Amendment outlawed slavery. I put my arm around Falstaff's shoulder and stood there dumbfounded.

The Confederates wanted to retain slavery: to be able to hold human beings as if they were property in spite of the Constitution and Thomas Jefferson's phrase in that document that read plainly, "All men are created equal."

“Dad?” Falstaff asked.

I thought of the Confederate soldiers mown down by Union gunfire and their young cheeks resting upon the dark ground. My fists clenched. If youth were killed in a blaze of glory but in the name of a despicable cause did they deserve to be memorialized? I felt my head spin like the little girl’s in *The Exorcist*. Maybe I was suffering from the heat.

Falstaff said, “Dad?”

I picked up Falstaff.

“Falstaff,” I said, “President Abraham Lincoln said on this battlefield in November of 1863 that we must remember these men and their actions. He said, WE HERE HIGHLY RESOLVE THAT THESE DEAD SHALL NOT HAVE FOUGHT IN VAIN, THAT THIS NATION, UNDER GOD, SHALL HAVE A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM, AND THAT GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE, SHALL NOT PERISH FROM THIS EARTH.”

“So?” Falstaff asked.

“Each person, no matter what, gets one vote. That’s equality. Back in the day, way back, the mighty ruled. Only owners of people, and powerful people, got to vote. Today, there’s fairness. Each person gets rights to life, liberty, and happiness, and most importantly, property. Property is *fundamental*, or else all of the other rights are meaningless. Forget what that anarchist said. You need to own your own things, and enough of it, or else government becomes Cyclops!”

“What?”

We continued walking. We got back in the car and got out at other sites in the shimmering heat. I came across monuments to North Carolina, to the treacherous Maryland division that fought for the south, and hence for inequality, and even a monument to a Confederate general by the name of

Lewis Armistead who had participated in Pickett's Charge, a charge by the south that had been obliterated by God and 6000 Union rifles. Both sides claimed Christianity, but the war had been interdenominational. Generally speaking, the Baptists were on the side of the north, and they won, because God preferred their cause. The wealthy southerners such as Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee had been Episcopalian. The Maryland Division was primarily Catholic. On the good side were thousands and thousands of Baptists and other Calvinists fighting for equality. The Episcopalian church began with Henry VIII's attempt to divorce his wife and devolved into a church that backed the rich. They believed in the divine right of kings, and didn't believe in equality. Henry VIII tossed women, chopped off their heads, and treated them like property, with no equal rights, because they had no property of their own. Even their bodies belonged to him. Baptists, on the other hand, were a much poorer sect that had arisen from Calvinism. The Civil War was a carryover of English class politics that had been transferred to America, and clashed at Gettysburg. I tried to make a coordinate graph of the principles at stake that would clarify things for Falstaff. Had it been only the size of the north that had caused the win, or had God helped turn the events? Had not God Himself decided in favor of equality? Were states equal to the nation? Lincoln had decided that the nation trumped the states. Perhaps it was only the size of the north that had helped them win. That would be unfair. My mind squirreled around trying to make sense of it.

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I clung to Lincoln's words and to the principles he sought to enunciate. I felt like a squirrel that had been hit

in the head with a rock and dropped his nut. Who exactly had backed those southern monuments? Back in the hot van, I turned the key and pulled out of the lot.

“Dad!” Falstaff said. “What was the Civil War? Why did they have it?”

“Let’s play Twenty Questions.”

“Ok, Dad,” Falstaff said.

The idea was to keep the child awake so that he would sleep when we got home.

“I have it,” I said.

“Is it a guitar?” Falstaff asked. Falstaff was always thinking about guitars.

“No,” I said to Falstaff.

“Dad, is it bigger than the house?” Falstaff asked.

“No.”

“Bigger than the car?”

“No.”

“Is it a person?” Mari asked.

“Yes. It’s a part of a person.”

“Is it on mommy?” Falstaff asked.

“Yes.”

“Is it her nose?” Falstaff asked.

“Yes, it is. Your turn, Falstaff.”

“Ok, dad, I’m thinking of something.”

I asked, "Falstaff, are you thinking of a guitar?"

"How did you know, Dad?"

We drove and stopped for lemonades and Falstaff had bathroom visits in the Port-a-Potty we kept in the car.



The next morning was Sunday and we got dressed and went to Sunday school. I dropped Falstaff at his class and then went into the parent's discussion group.

The church was a triangularly shaped brick building with a triangular entrance-way and a triangular area for the pastor's office. It sat smack up against a large undeveloped mountain. In winter, coyotes would walk down over the hill to sniff at the stroganoff being prepared for the reception. The clear glass had been replaced with colored glass.

Downstairs, there was a kitchen and a large reception area where the children attended Sunday school. My child loved to get out of Sunday school with small bags of crackers and to ride toy trains and horses the length of the reception area.

As the service began, we went up to the front. There were now about 200 regular members of the congregation. One could hear German as well as Finnish. The children communicated with spitballs. The regular pastor and his wife were visiting a family out in Oregon. Father Brewster was the retired pastor but he still gave one hell of a sermon. As Father Brewster began the sermon, I was shocked to see Falstaff walking around.

"Falstaff!" I whispered.

Falstaff continued, walking between pews, while trying to slap five with the older Germans. One of the older Germans, a man named Jurgen, joked about the prodigal son.

Pastor Brewster, a gaunt older man with great height nearly a century in age, sturdy as a giant oak, had mentioned the passage in Matthew 22 where Christ says to the Pharisees, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." The money changers, the pastor said, were taking advantage of a situation in which money was circulating inside the temple. The Roman money had the head of Caesar Augustus on it, and the word Divinus printed after his name, and so it was forbidden inside the temple. We are infinite in value, Pastor Brewster said, every one of us, because of the inscription of Jesus on our souls stamped at baptism. We are all equal in the name of the Lord. I felt he was looking at me. Maybe he knew about the baby my wife was going to sell into slavery. Until the day when He calls His coinage back into His heavenly treasure, we belong to Him, he said. I tried to believe that even I was infinite in value, although I had a hard time explaining everything around me even to myself. I watched the pastor pour out the wine with a shaky hand for communion, sing the various hymns, and finally ceremonially doff his tunic to lay it upon the altar. It was only then that I realized that Falstaff had come to rest securely by my side. He was asleep, with his cheek against my shoulder.

The service was punctuated by an erratic substitute organ player who would speed up the tempo, the hoots and shrill cries of children, and the idea of an eternal savior.

Falstaff asked me when we got out, "Dad, is Jesus my friend? If so, why doesn't he play with me at church?"

"He is busy holding churches all over the world together," I said. "Even in Vietnam and in China there are churches, and even in North Korea. They are smashed by secularists, and the people in them are forced to eat gravel, which breaks their teeth."

"Dad, I don't care about those people that are far away. I want a friend right now."

Kids looked at Falstaff funny, and nobody took him seriously. I had no idea why. They said he talked funny. I tried to throw a ball with him but he said it wasn't the same as throwing a ball with other children. How would he know, since other children never threw a ball with him?

We were driving on Kingston Road across the bridge and I had to get some gas from the corner *Mobil* and pick up an *Oneonta Star* to see if there were any yard sales. I got back in the van.

"Is Jesus the guy that keeps our hearts pumping?" Falstaff asked.

"Yup," I said.

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