

My Boy Falstaff

by [Kirby Olson](#) (August 2020)



Ashes, Edvard Munch, 1894

Norm, Helena has turned blue,” she said. “Don’t forget the insurance card!”

We piled into the van, and threw Falstaff into his seat and rocketed through Delaware County at 2 am. Halfway over I checked my pocket for my wallet with the insurance card. I

felt it. My glasses were in disarray from the beating they had taken, but I managed to perceive distances correctly. Forty minutes later we arrived at Cooperstown Bassett Hospital and were shown into the emergency room where Mari presented Helena. They inserted a steroid and her throat swelling went down, and she immediately turned pink again.

The doctor told us the kid would live. I crossed my fingers.

"It'll be ok," I said to Mari.

The doctors also checked the lump on the side of Falstaff's head, and said he would be okay in a few days.

I went into the waiting room. Hours passed. The morning seemed routine. The newspaper arrived from Oneonta. The new and improved president was still in the process of Making America Great Again, and he was throwing bombs at liberals, and writing Tweets which put the media on notice that he was the stronger party. ISIS was on the run or disposed of in Syria, and there was a tremendous rolling back everywhere of Islamist advances. In the middle pages there was an article about the fracas at my house and there were statements from the arresting officer. As I was going through it, looking for any new details, my cellphone rang.

"Norm, you got a minute?"

It was the officer.

"Sure."

"That guy was a Hindu militant from India, apparently. He had married into an American upper-class family but we found hundreds of guns and bombs in his house. They were trying to get white babies to raise as militants in order to wreck America in the name of bringing back Aryan Brahminism on a world-wide basis, but this guy wanted a white baby to kill

as a Wiccan offering to bring back his wife's health and beauty, so he believed in two things and was confused. At any rate, he took a cyanide pill shortly after the confession and suffice it to say he won't be bothering you any longer."

"Ok," I said, and thanked him for the information. With the criminally insane you often find a wealth of motivations that support a general mayhem, so forget about the motives. As long as they're dead, that's good enough. Perhaps he was a Hindu nationalist who had told Herculeana he was only interested in her health. Lies radiate new lies in extensive patterns.

We went into the restaurant and got Falstaff some broth, and some free crackers. We were parsimonious. I continued to read the paper. In the corner of the page in the second section there was a round-up of Supreme Court Cases and the decisions handed down. The case Herculeana would have brought on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses children was resolved in their favor. They could go from store to store in the malls as long as they were exercising freedom of expression not in conflict with capitalism.

"Dad, read me a book?" Falstaff asked.

I checked the weather column and it said cold would remain for a while.

Falstaff rummaged through books on the restaurant table and handed me a book about emperor penguins. Emperor penguins were the largest of the 16 penguin species. Their scientific name was *Aptenodytes forsteri* after naturalist Johann Forster. Forster discovered them early in the 19th century on a voyage with Captain James Cook. The emperor penguins weighed up to 100 pounds and were 37 inches in height. After the mother penguin would give birth to a penguin egg, she would dive into the sea and go fishing for 65 days. The male penguins would then huddle in large groups keeping the eggs warm and take

turns moving into the center of the huddle to get warm and then revolve until they moved back to the outside. They were reasonable, although somewhat suspiciously socialist. The emperor penguins lived in Antarctica and other islands up to the Falklands and evolved their congregational huddle in order to counter the cold. During the 65 days the dads kept the eggs warm by balancing them in a specific brood pouch that had evolved on their webbed feet. After 65 days the mothers returned, with routines, and the babies were born, and the dads could dive deep into the sea and focus on gathering the fish to help their family survive.

I noticed that Falstaff had fallen asleep with his head on my lap, and I put the book down. Then I realized that he wasn't breathing. I felt his pulse. My son was dead.

Falstaff's seventh birthday had been in mid-March. I remembered his sixth birthday when five children in his playschool were invited. Four came. There were cupcakes and laughter and ice cream. The boys gathered on the floor and began punching one another in a full-on brawl, careful only to punch rear ends and the outer part of thighs. They laughed uproariously. The kids danced to disco music and played pin the tail on the donkey and ate egregious amounts of candy. I was glad when they went home, but it was one of my favorite memories. After, I loaded up the gift packaging into bags and stuffed them into the car to take them out to the county dump. *En route* I looked at a raised platform that ran along Highway 10 which had once been the old railway bed for the Ontario & Hudson spike that ran from Walton to Calcutta until 1957. The train until 1957 brought in coal every day and brought out milk. It was now a footpath that ran along the highway. I walked with my son Falstaff while he was still a toddler in his blue snowsuit along that path, holding his hand through his blue mitten. We went out to the sewer treatment plant and knocked on the door and had been given an impromptu tour by

the manager, an obscure neighbor who seemed to recognize me and who was checking the pumps to make sure they were working.

Falstaff had gotten sick from time to time. He spent a lot of time playing with trains in the house, drawing pictures, playing hide and seek with his mom, as neither one liked the cold. Sometimes, I remembered him lowered into the ground, a small boy in a tiny box beside the church. I didn't like the cold, and remembered pressing my cheek against the snow, praying for Falstaff, trying to feel warmth, and I knew I could never walk in the snow without thinking of him alone under the ground, and would cry as I remembered him.

I thought of my hero Soren Kierkegaard and how he never thought about things like treatment plants, and rarely mentioned children. Soren Kierkegaard was a bachelor. He didn't have to think about communities, or responsibility to families, or children. Everything was about the soul. He never thought about the role of government in the maintenance of roads, or communities, or hospitals. Kierkegaard put faith above every earthly inkling and even above ethical norms. He thought it was a good idea for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, because his only criterion was the individual soul. Kierkegaard never married, but if he had he might have had a son and found that sacrifice impossible. He never put a beloved child into this world, or lowered one into the ground, or apparently even thought about that as a personal possibility. Christianity since Kierkegaard had been too otherworldly. It had often been the Marxists and socialists and secular anarchists who had fought for plant safety, and for better working conditions for the poor, and for children, but Marxists and anarchists created more problems than they solved. I wished now I had a practical solution.

New girls and boys were destroyed throughout history all the way back to the book of Esther in the Old Testament. Sin had caused children to die along with their parents back in the days of Moses and Aaron. Jesus had almost been

destroyed on the orders of the king. Government in the Lutheran tradition is a necessary evil as are the police force and the army.

Mari had been on the computer writing an email to her friend Ulna describing the attack by Dali and the subsequent funeral.

Dali was in the cemetery. Herculeana was dead, too. Helena was still ours. I had run with Falstaff to the emergency room but he had simply stopped breathing. It was a cerebral hemorrhage. Once a child is dead, there is no bringing him back. You can't repair death.

We had lost all the money gained from Mari's scheme to carry a baby, and had to pay a fine on top, and Falstaff had been killed. What had we gained in the bargain? A beauty: Helena. Helena looked like a regular kid. I did take her for baptism on her fourth day of life, but was curious to see how it would go. She had a comical look of distress. The cold water awakened her and she cried, holding her fatty arms to both sides and wiggling her feet.

Then it was Mari's turn. I saw her body in the shower with a note pinned to her chest. "I'm sorry, Falstaff." Finns rarely apologize. I took her little body down from the noose and carried her to the couch. She was stiff.

In the years to come I dreamed that the buildings of Manhattan were the heads of Easter Island, and that we all walked among them in peace as promised in the Book of Revelation. Falstaff and Mari walked beside me and neither one was as tall as a skyscraper, but I accepted them and they me. Falstaff towered above us. I was regulation height, but he got to be well over six feet. He not only grew in heaven, but grew big enough to play basketball with other boys there and take over the varsity team as a senior at Heavenly Academy. Falstaff and I and Mari were like Moses and Aaron and Miriam.

We ourselves would never make it to the promised land where there were no worries, or make it quite back to the green fields of Jerusalem where money was never a worry. We always worried about every penny. I took many tranquilizers to sleep and remained in a dreamy twilight. My head contained many things. It seemed to be like the heads of Easter Island, massive and useless, or as tall and thin as the skyscrapers of New York City. Why hadn't I put my foot down when Mari had first brought up the hare-brained scheme? Yet in some obscure way, God had moved through Mari. I thought of the road going to New York City and all the lives of all the people between the Catskills and Washington, DC and its northern Virginian suburbs. Everyone working to make their lives better but no one accepting what they have. No one able to think: things could always be worse! My family was odd, and damaged, but this was God's will and I was content, because at least I had had a family, when around me were others who would never be content. Beauteous men in suits and ties—all radiant! Women in skirts & blouses—radiant! The crowds stuffing themselves into the 42nd street underpass, advertisements for trucks and cigarettes and oranges and gloves at Times Square. The coinage of Caesar was circulating and it forced out the coinage of agape love which was celebrated but forgotten in all but the churches from the Catskills' white spires to the tall gray massive cathedrals of Manhattan. Radiant! Cockroaches quizzically bending their heads out of jewelers' shops along 47th street, boarded up porno shops since the mayor before last had decided to clean up the borough and make it safer for women and children, the little vegetarian delicatessens throughout the Catskills, the scales of justice deciding against Xerxes ever so briefly at Thermopylae and then more seriously at Salamis, Greek victories leading to Greek freedom, and thus the spread of the Christian faith after Paul's entrance into Corinth and his letters to the Corinthians and Thessalonians yet extant, the population of NYC living in upended rivers called skyscrapers, toilets a mile high flush the Chinese dinners, tugboats go by on the

East River, and a mist on the river the face of humanity becoming something else, the skyscrapers babbling to Caesar about Mammon, the cathedrals with their rose-colored glasses providing yet another perspective on the night sky, men walking among us with attaché cases, and aluminum cigarette lighters, contempt for all but business the evergreen religion, offset by churches and synagogues and mosques, socialist and Democratic working men's associations, all with plans for new construction, all with rainbows to answer, the scales of justice in the town halls working overtime to decide the fates of all, as I knew my family had been my entrance into love, now a door that would be open forever, and all was well, and thought of how to explain all the information in the world to my child Helena so that she could join it seamlessly, and Helena a writer but without glasses like her father, and Helena revealed daily as a hope for change to this world to one of endless beauty, the invisible becoming visible, a blizzard of snow descending from the bright sky like children's mittens of every size and color.

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