

The Mountain

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



Schneesmelze (Melting Snow), Max Pechstein, 1922

I shoveled snow. The mountain across from our house was known as Federal Hill #3. It has a dirt road going up through it with potholes like bomb craters. The whole family went up once and we had to turn the white Sierra '92 around as the potholes were too big for the car. As I looked up from shoveling the snow on the driveway I could see that the leaves were all gone on the mountain opposite and the bare trees looked like the stubble on an old man. It was early January. I had a sharp pain in my left armpit from lifting snow.

The child dragged out the blue sled and was going down the sloping side of the driveway. In the sky drifted clouds that didn't look like barracudas or any state in America. Ugly cold weather froze the barns and trees. There were fox prints around the driveway. The snow was coming down and I had read that the temperature would rise on Wednesday. With the new baby I had so much fear. I dreamed the night before that I was running in front of a rickshaw carrying them all to a home or hospital that I couldn't find in a bad neighborhood, and the communists were chasing me.

I often wished that I had three superpowerful kids who were the Powerpuff Girls and I was the scientist and they could not only save themselves but they could save Townsville! "The City of Townsville is on full alert!" The active love in the Powerpuff Girls saves Townsville!

Across the town stood the huge brick building of Gandhi Tower where I worked. I thought of all the flies in the stairwells, and the coyote I had seen sniffing at the corner of it on a snowy January years before when the students were gone and the faculty and staff had long gone home for Christmas break while I went upstairs into the lonely tower to get a book. At first I thought it was a dog and then saw its feral eyes. In the basement of Gandhi Tower were huge pumps that pushed steam and water circulating liquid up through the tower. Heat, running water, flowing rivers circulating in the upended city in which thousands of students and staff and faculty came and went every day. Electricity circulated in light bulbs.

Falstaff had brought the blue sled into the back yard and dragged it to the top of a hill. Falstaff stood up from the sled and began to do his latest dance, moving his butt while wiggling his arms over his head and his shoulders in yet another direction.

I ran to join him. As we flew down the back yard in

the sled we scraped off the top layer of snow and a tiny mole that looked like a mouse ran around on top of the snow squeaking. I was terrified that the creature would bite Falstaff so I stepped on it in the snow and it exploded in a halo of blood.

“What you do unto the least of these ye do also unto me.” Christ’s voice boomed in my head. I felt sorry for the creature but my child had been at stake. I crossed myself and hid my tears from Falstaff and threw the tiny creature into the woods.

I put the rope cord of the blue sled around my neck and pulled Falstaff around the yard. I looked at my watch. It was 4:17 pm. The light was going down.

“Mommy said no sledding toward the street,” Falstaff said.

I took Falstaff for a walk around the circle 8. The lights were now coming on. The town was a sequence of twinkling lights. A crow floated over the bare trees.

“What color is the crow?” I asked Falstaff.

“Ebony!”

I could see out over the town. There were many churches including our own the Lutheran. There were 25 or 30 homes and as we walked through the town at sunset I could hear the trucks on the highway running through the valley and I could hear the coyotes off in the distance.

The stars started to come out. The snow coming down was wet, and my glasses became blurry. A cat tinkled across the streets, its bells would save the mice that were alive beneath the snow waiting for spring. It was now 5:17 and I was getting tired of carrying Falstaff so we turned around when Falstaff wanted to walk. I set him down and he began to skip.

I had a snuffle, and a cough that kept me awake. A car went by on the road and I could hear inside it the Chuck Berry hit from the fifties, "Mississippi Bridge." Chuck's friend's home in the song was on the south side, and mine was in the north. He was situated along the Mississippi, while mine was along the Delaware River. I coughed. I could see in back of the second house from ours a gray & white striped cat walking across the top of the crusted snow. The trees now in the dimmest twilight along the top of Federal Hill #3 looked like confederate soldiers as I thought of Falstaff sledding down the back hill and as he flew, he rolled and tumbled, the sky overhead blue with clouds, the winter far from over. Falstaff and I walked past the Mormon church. The American flag tinged against the pole with its 50 stars for the states and the 13 stripes for the original colonies. My hands were freezing.

What do the bear do all winter in hibernation? Do they dream? What about the crows as they glide above the trees? Are they daydreaming? What about the giant shadows that came out in the spring when the sun was so strong, were they now dreaming of spring? All of life had gone underground, but Falstaff and I continued walking. I started to sing the ABCs to him, and then stopped at P so he could fill it in. I kissed his cheek. I stopped again at Z so he could fill it in. Then he told me he could sing the whole thing by himself. He did. He asked me if I wanted him to spell antidisestablishmentarianism again. He went ahead. I had misplaced priorities. In the spring we could go for walks with the new baby in a stroller.

As we walked up the long driveway I thought of the months ahead. The headaches and the fevers, and now a new Asian flu that had killed children in California. The church would remain a sanctuary, but I never drank from the cup. I always went first and I would tinct, to escape the flu viruses. I went through the motions in my mind of dipping the

communion wafer in and touching just the very edge of the wine and quickly retrieving it. My knees always felt like marshmallows as I set them on the wooden kneeler.

I was glad to live in a small town. The neighborhood had tiny controversies. A black cat had been abducted several years before, a man insisted, others maintained cats are picked off by eagles, and others suggested it was coyotes. The reading teacher on the next block spoke to me of the controversy between whole word and phonetics. A storm drain on the next block collapsed and it required two summers before the village men repaired it. There was an accordion of facts throughout the neighborhood and now the moon was coming up judging us like a woman resting her chin on her hand.

It did seem that God was more prevalent in the rural areas than in the cities with loners rampaging in the streets while our paradise of cow pastures gave us safety. I took Falstaff inside and helped him out of his snow suit and then got out the door bottom that I had bought the previous day and peeled off the plastic. I took off the old door bottom, and screwed the new one on. It had a rubber edge on the lower part that kept the cold air out. Perhaps it would also keep out the meningococcal bacteria that killed children. Dottie insisted on keeping the house scrupulously clean and often scrubbed the floors and sinks and demanded that we leave our shoes at the front door. The house was completely clean but I never minded when she redoubled her efforts.

I walked through the neighborhood by myself while Dottie made bread. The snow dumped almost three feet on Calcutta. I saw some neighbors who were out for a stroll. I said hello. Was she his actual wife, or another woman? I never knew the neighbors and couldn't keep them straight. Why did the churches now so uniformly accept divorce? You could get one if you disagreed over the wallpaper. I didn't bother to figure out who was with who. My own churches in my upbringing had been too strict too but now that I was an adult I regarded

all churches with affection. I walked down Main Street, which was piled up five feet with snow and most of the businesses were snowed in. A huge loader was filling a dump truck next to the Court House Square with snow. It beeped when it backed up. I walked on thinking of the pedometer on my hip. It said 18,000 steps. I was supposed to do 7,000 every day in order to get the lard off, but I tried for 21,000.

I went home and flicked the ballgame on. The Lakers were leading Miami 60-54, with 1:10 left in the third quarter. Once, years before, when Shaq was with the Lakers I had seen he and Kobe crush the Mavs as they went on a 4th quarter run of 28-0 to win by two points. They were prose poetry. Effective and yet miraculous. I tried to play basketball and would occasionally hit several three-pointers in a row. I could spin now, and occasionally I got lucky and it looked like I knew what I was doing. I was friends with many of the players on the local college team, and tried to encourage them to take my classes. Mostly, this was because I needed their encouragement, and their example. I also spurred them, especially against Herkimer, a team with a giant named Feiler that always beat us. In addition, I tried to watch the games on Tv so I could playfully banter with them about who was hot. But it hurt my eyes to watch the TV. There was a tiny discrepancy in my glasses and it caused tension in my left eye. My insurance made me wait two more years to get a new pair. I took them off and rubbed my eye as I saw Falstaff pop his head up over the short wall behind the TV. What was his problem? He had gotten a piece of sausage that Dottie had bought and cooked for him and smuggled it into his room. Elliot, the Maltese dog, had sniffed it and stolen it from him.

“Dad,” he said. “Can you get it back?”

I didn't want to miss the game, but I went in his room and saw Elliot, a five-pound ball of fluff, staring at me

like some kind of religious fanatic refusing to let go of a passage from some book. I went closer, and he growled. I remembered that, scientifically-speaking, a dog is a wolf. They are the same species because they can have children. Elliot, who I had seen as decorative, and whose passions seemed to go from putting his head on your lap to zig-zagging through the back lawn on a summer's day, was suddenly something else. He wasn't Falstaff's pet any longer. He was a purebred wolf.

"I don't think we are going to win this fight," I said to Falstaff.

At that point, Dottie entered the room.

"You are going to let this little dog win?" She said. She attempted to take the piece of sausage. He bit her hand and blood appeared.

"Norm, do something!" She whimpered.

Even then, the dog did not appear to back off. I thought of kicking it, but then wondered what the PETA people would have to say about that, and even Dottie and Falstaff might think I had transgressed. It might be a wolf, but it was only a five-pound wolf.

"Falstaff," I said, "What about a cupcake?"

We abandoned the sausage slice to the dog, who moved it underneath Falstaff's bed. He wasn't about to come out. Dottie looked at me as if I wasn't a man, and went back to her room after rinsing her wound in the sink and applying peroxide. She got on her phone and called her relative in Finland and complained about me and the lack of manhood in American men. I could barely understand Finnish, but I got that much.

Falstaff came over and sat next to me and I put my

glasses back on and we watched the rest of the ballgame together.

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