

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Naomi Kennel  
**Living in the Stars**

*The Crooked-Mouth family just finished eating their Thanksgiving dinner of turkey, giblet gravy, stuffing, mashed potatoes, candied sweet potatoes, wild rice casserole, green peas, cranberry sauce, dinner rolls, and pumpkin pie. Pa picked up a lighted candle and asked Mary to blow the candle out; when she blew all the air came out of the right side of her mouth; nothing changed. Pa asked Sam to blow the candle out; he blew hard from the left side of his mouth; no success. He asked Beth to try; she blew down, not effecting the result intended. He gave the candle to Mack who blew up, with the same result. He finally handed it to Johnny who turned his head, aimed the gap in his teeth at the candle, and gave a quick burst of air. Pa said, "Look Ma, Johnny's been to college!"*

My whole family used to sit around a Thanksgiving dinner like this: more mashed potatoes than you could possibly eat and parents scolding little children for their cheeky remarks. Then, after we had all eaten our fill, we would collectively look at each other with knowing eyes as my grandpa pulled out a candle and began the inevitable story of the Crooked-Mouths. My grandpa never missed an opportunity to tell this story. No candle was ever safe from his Crooked-Mouth impressions. Even as Parkinson's Disease slowly ate away his nerves and motor functions my grandpa made sure he blew out each and every candle. I would always hold my breath while he told the story, anxious that he would accidentally blow the candle out at the wrong time as his hands and lips trembled. But even after all those years, he always got it right.

Parkinson's disease is caused by a loss of nerve cells in the region of the brain that produces dopamine. The lack of dopamine causes a chemical imbalance in the brain leading to altered muscle activation manifesting as tremors, rigidity resulting in abnormal walking, posture, speech, and eventually death. I always knew my grandpa was dying, but it never really made sense to me. I was taught that death is a beginning, a new life. But my grandpa didn't seem to be going anywhere new. Every time we visited him he seemed a little weaker, visits were a little shorter, and his hands were a little less still. Every time we visited him he told the story of the Crooked-Mouths so none of that other stuff mattered.

1. What is it like to know you're dying from an incurable disease?
2. Will it kill me one day?

Now all that other stuff matters.

I didn't talk to my grandpa much; I couldn't think of anything to say. *Hi grandpa!* I'd exclaim when I saw him and then, *Bye grandpa!* Even though I didn't talk to him, my grandpa talked to me. He'd pull each of my siblings aside, one by one, and tell us, *I love you, God loves you.* I never understood why he'd tell us this so many times. I never understood why he liked listening to classical music so much either; it made me sleepy, or

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why he kept a zebra skin on his wall, played Rook for hours, talked about llamas with a passion that rivaled any motivational speaker, loved diet root beer, and completed puzzles almost as religiously as going to church.

3. If I talked to him, what would I say?
4. What did he say that I don't remember?
- 5.. Why do I still not understand all these things?

My grandpa left footprints all around the world. He lived and worked in Africa, Alaska, Peru, the British Isles, and finally settled in a beautiful house on a pastoral llama farm. I don't remember much from that house besides its fuzzy stairs down to the basement and the giant oak tree next to the driveway. I wish I could say I remember my grandpa there, but I don't. I only remember him in the Assisted Living section of Charter House, a retirement home, on the fourth floor surrounded by nurses in scrubs with rubber duckies on them. His room had a big reclining chair operated with a remote controller that my siblings and I would fight over. Usually we all ended up squished together, unwilling to forfeit our remedy for the boring conversations of old people. Now I wish I had listened. The fourth floor always smelled of hand sanitizer and baby wipes. The smell seeped into your clothing and would linger for days. My grandpa never smelled like this; he smelled like wood. The wood that sits in your fireplace but is only slightly burned and the wood from the walls of an old sturdy house that is starting to mix with the Earth.

My grandpa was a cardiologist. He had the profession, knowledge, and skills that I now seek. I wonder what he sought when he had everything that I dream of. I can't say I'll ever know, but I do know that he had values guided by faith. He had more faith in God and everything that you can't see than I do of the things right in front of me. I suppose that's why I'm following in his footsteps: to be where he was, to do as he did, and to seek as he sought. I want my path to resonate in his footprints.

6. What if my feet are too small to follow?

I want to discover the answers to my 27 questions. I want to know where all the candle flames went when my grandpa blew them out or if they are anywhere at all. I wonder if my grandpa ever found what he was looking for. I wonder if his purpose *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?*<sup>1</sup> led him to live in the stars. I wonder if he was ever satisfied in expressing this purpose. If he found the perfect book in the Library of Babel that propelled him to the meaning of life. Or, if he was even looking for it in the first place.

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1 Micah 6:8

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7. Was the Bible really the book that gave him purpose?
8. Can it be that simple for me too?
9. Is it too late to ask him if he found what he was looking for?

One Friday, my dad picked me up from school in the middle of my 6th grade English Class. I was confused. My dad was still wearing his suit and tie from work and wasn't supposed to pick me up for my gymnastics meet until hours later. When I came out of the classroom, my older brother was waiting for me as well. I followed him silently into the car and to floor four of Charter House. I already knew what had happened before anyone said a word. My dad pushed open the door to my grandpa's room.

There lay a body.  
A dead star.  
A burned-out candle.

With a carefully aimed blow from Johnny Crooked-Mouth's lips, my grandpa's flame had finally blown out. *Look Ma, Johnny's been to college!*

Stars are more powerful when they die. Floating in space, stars face very strong inward gravitational pulls that leave the star in danger of collapsing in on itself. Fortunately, nuclear fusion produces enough energy for the star to become stabilized. In a young star, hydrogen nuclei fuse into helium to balance the pull of gravity. Eventually, the star runs out of hydrogen and its core once again becomes unstable and heats up. This creates a core that is hot enough to fuse helium into lower level elements to balance the star. As the star's life continues it fuses each element through iron, Element 26.

But even the stars must die.

They will burn out and collapse in a giant explosion called a supernova. As the explosion happens, atoms from the star crash into each other with enough energy to fuse together and grow larger and larger to produce new elements and scatter these fragments of their celestial body across the Universe like ashes in the wind.

It turns out, we are not so different from the cosmos after all.

10. Did my grandpa know he was made of starstuff?

We spread my grandpa's ashes. They were in bags and each member of my family spread one in the Mississippi River just below the lock and dam where he dreamed of catching the big one. As we watched them meld into

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the current and begin their eternal travel to the beyond, I remembered my grandpa's love of fishing. Then I thought of mine. I love watching the water glimmer with anticipation as I remembered what it was like with my grandpa beside me. Looking back at photos now, I was much too young to have actually fished with him but I'd like to remember him that way anyways. That way I can think of him as his ashes swirl down the river playfully like a final wave goodbye even though I bet they'll turn up somewhere. Maybe in the irrigation of a farm or the gills of a fish or wherever water goes once it reaches the Gulf of Mexico. We wanted to spread my grandpa's ashes on his farm but the new owners had already moved in. He wanted to be there. *All came from the dust and all return to the dust.*<sup>2</sup> His body may be gone, but I suspect we missed a few pieces of him that are still floating about. I like to think that they're in the subatomic level bouncing between orbitals like an electron as energy shifts in the Universe or the whispers of smoke from a blown out flame.

11. Where can I find these pieces?
12. What if he's gone and I'm searching for something that doesn't exist?
13. Maybe that's the whole point?
14. Maybe none of it matters?

I've been searching for these fragments of my grandpa ever since, even though I know I'll never find him. At least not empirically. Searching for him is like creating synthetic super-heavy elements: nearly impossible. However, there are ways around this impossibility: the \$60 million Super-heavy Element Factory (SHEF)<sup>3</sup> in Dubna, Russia, engineers and scientists employing degrees, and faith.

Or, as my grandpa would say, "We do the difficult. The impossible takes a little longer." Then, as inevitably as the story of the Crooked-Mouths, he would say something about his faith.

*Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*<sup>4</sup>

Faith is more powerful than any scientific discovery or explanation. Faith is what drives men to their deaths and then up to the heavens. I think the very fact that I think my grandpa must be somewhere is only proof that he is. After all, these thoughts must come from somewhere. When Isaac Newton wondered why apples fall down and not up, those thoughts must have come from somewhere too. I have faith. Faith that he is out there somewhere, whether he's right in front of me or living in the stars.

2 Genesis 3:19

3 A factory currently working to synthesize Element 119

4 Hebrews 11:1

15. If I say this enough times will I believe it?

My grandpa chose to die. He didn't stretch his life out like a star. He didn't wait till his very last atoms had fused. Instead, he stopped taking his medicine and supernova-d on his own terms. I don't even remember when I saw my grandpa alive for the last time. There were no tearful goodbyes or last hugs or last *I love you, God loves you*. He must've known that death wasn't the end for him. He must've had the same faith that I do: that his starstuff and flame are still existing in some inexplicable way. *He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*<sup>5</sup>

16. Can faith exist without God?

17. Is his work living on through my work?

18. Does he know that I carry his starstuff with me?

19. Who will carry my starstuff when I'm gone?

Making a new element requires a certain type of faith. It's like shooting a laser at a needle in a haystack, hoping the light and needle fuse together, and capturing the laser-needle as it rockets out before it vanishes in time as short as five milliseconds. Except the laser is emitted by a cyclotron that accelerates highly charged ions to around ten percent of the speed of light and shoots them out as a beam that has intensities of trillions of ions per second. Most of the time, when they impact the heavier target element, the process fails to create a new element. The repulsive force between the protons overcomes the attractive force that would merge the nuclei and the whole thing is torn apart. However, ever so often the nuclear binding force wins and two nuclei fuse together, form a new element, and achieve the difficult. It took nine years for the RIKEN Research Institute in Japan to create three atoms, the amount needed for an official discovery of Element 113. I've been searching for my grandpa for seven.

20. How many more years before I give up?

Despite the scientific impossibility of my search, I've managed to catch glimpses of him when I get lucky enough. I like to think that these glimpses are clues to what he was searching for or what he is still searching for. Maybe he wants me to be searching too. Maybe he wants me to build a cyclotron and blast it with faith until I'm in the stars with him. I wish I had faith like my grandpa. To close my eyes and jump knowing that I will fly more often than fall. Maybe if I had more faith I could see him. Maybe he's right in front of me but I'm blinded by my own doubt. Maybe I'm a hypocrite for searching when I don't believe I can find him.

5      Philippians 1:6

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This September, I started diving for the first time. More accurately, I started chucking myself off a diving board and praying like I was a sinner about to die. I also started college. It also feels like I'm chucking myself and praying except I don't know where, or if, I'm going to land. I impulsively joined the dive team by emailing the coach last June. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't know why I did it. I just did. I still don't know why I do it; jumping like it is my purpose in life to touch the sky and then fall right back down. The coach likes to tell me, "If you're not scared you're not doing it right." I always nod my head, prepare myself to jump again, and try to feel anything other than the gaping hole of uncertainty in my chest.

21. Would I dive better if I had more faith?
22. Why am I even diving in the first place?
23. What am I searching for?

I guess not knowing why but still jumping day after day is a sort of messed-up faith. Each 105c<sup>6</sup> or 5231D<sup>7</sup> or 303c<sup>8</sup> brings me closer to the answers I seek even though all I can feel is the pull of gravity. They show me the kind of messed-up faith of emptiness that drives me to fill myself with spoons of neutron stars hoping that if I weigh a billion tons my ions will fuse and I can bear the impact of newness.

But right now I can't.

I can't search the 100 billion stars in the Milky Way. I already tried this from a mountain in Ecuador. I saw the galaxy spread like drops of powdered sugar across the sky and felt something I knew I couldn't reach. It made me want to throw myself in a black hole to become a part of the infinite. It made me want to live and die all at the same time. It made me want to believe in God. It brought me back to Earth, full of messed-up faith, to search where photons can find my eyes.

24. What even are feelings anyways?
25. The enemy of science?
26. The driver of faith?
27. The foolish humanness of impossible hope?

It's probably better that I don't have the answers.

Occasionally, my messed-up faith and laser-needles succeed in fusing something new. During the Covid quarantine I played Rook with my brothers. *Hi grandpa!* I walked by a puzzle shop last year. *Bye grandpa!* Today I got root beer from the dining hall. *Hi grandpa!* I have my first orches-

- 6        2 ½ front flips in a tuck position
- 7        1 ½ back flips and a half twist in a layout position
- 8        1 ½ reverse flips (jump forwards while flipping backwards) in a tuck position

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tra concert tomorrow. *Bye grandpa!* Every week I go to church. *I love you, God loves you.* And especially, when I see a candle. First I'll give it a hard look to see if there's something special in there: a sign, a message, anything. When that doesn't work, I watch the flames dance for a bit and give them a little blow. *Hi grandpa!* I breathe in its smoky, woody smell. *Bye grandpa!* I take the memory of my grandpa, the light element that is living in the stars, and shoot it with trillions of ions per second at my heavy element heart and hope that I'll finally know where the candle flame goes when I give it a quick puff out just like Johnny Crooked-Mouth. *Look Grandpa, I've been to college!*