

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

Craig Rondinone

"The End of the Beginning of the End"

I have often wondered aloud and silently to myself how the conversation between God and I would transpire when I die and am lucky enough to make it to Heaven's gates (if there is a Heaven with gates). As a baptized Catholic who practices his religion as much as Allen Iverson used to practice basketball, I think it may go down something like this: Hello, God. I think I'm dead. I really thought I had safely avoided that cement mixer! Sitting on the couch behind a computer all day does not do much for your lateral quickness, I guess. "I am pleased to meet you, Craig. I wish it was under different circumstances, but I am so glad you lived a long, fruitful life. I am joyful that you found love and spent five decades being showered with affection by your lovely wife and your two adorable children, and I am grateful you did not experience too much emotional or physical pain, at least an amount you could not bear. You prepared your children to live, survive, prosper and thrive in our world, and they and your grandchildren and great-grandchildren will proudly carry on your family name and be bastions of their communities. I thank you for all of your fine work as a parent, husband, son, friend, co-worker, mentor and human being." "Wow, you're too kind with the compliments! Thanks for the opportunity to live life! I loved every minute of it! Well, maybe not the irritable bowel syndrome and the colonoscopy. I loved 99.9 percent of it! But I am ready for Phase Two. I want to finally reconnect with my mother, father, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends and pets, along with every loved one and professional sports hero that passed on before I did. So where's the welcoming party? I know there must be a plate of pepperoni around here somewhere with my name on it. "Before I confirm your final fate, I just want to recap some of the events that transpired during your lifetime that have influenced my decision on what will happen to you in the afterlife. There were plenty of pivotal points to take into account when rendering the verdict on where you will spend the second half of your existence as you transition from mortal to spirit. Let's take a few minutes to shine a spotlight on the moments in your life that mattered to me the most."

I'm all ears! Feel free to edit down the potpourri of wonderful things I did. I know it's a lengthy laundry list. You can skip over all the homemade Christmas cards I made for my mom and all the times I'd let my friends copy off my tests in school, for example. "There was the time as a child when your mother took you to a local Barnes and Noble and you sat Indian style in the middle of the store and cried out 'I hate books!' There was also when you were young that you wrote with chalk all over your parents' living room paneling and got the first and only (and well-deserved) spanking of your life." "I was a better youngster than most, though. Don't forget about all the honor rolls I attained and the perfect attendance certificates I collected during my adolescent years. Wait, you're on board with spanking?" "There were the countless times you chose Atari video games, Dungeons and Dragons and online poker over spending time with your family, working hard at your jobs or attempting to find the cure for cancer. There was the year you fudged the final numbers to win a fantasy baseball league because you needed the money to pay bills and debts be-

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cause of your financial faults."You got me, Mr. G.I spent a little too much time on my hobbies and took some of them too seriously. I wish I could go back and do things differently. Now, about the next chapter of my existence..."There was when your doctor chastised you for being overweight and having a vitamin D deficiency and succinctly told you, 'More sunshine, less McDonald's.'You proceeded to get less of the former and more of the latter, and it is not because you heard the instructions incorrectly. You loved your meatballs, tacos and television more than you liked fruits, vegetables and jogging, and that sadly shaved a couple years off your life."You're right again. I'm glad my wife didn't allow our children to make the same mistakes I made. I wish I started dating her a decade sooner. Well, look at the time..."There was when you readily admitted to an attentive crowd at a party that you always feel like you need a shower after you defecate. There was the moment you overdid your drinking of an alcoholic beverage called Mad Dog 20/20 and passed out on the living room floor at a friend's house, then woke up in the middle of the night and vomited all over yourself and the carpeting, which supposedly depreciated the value of the house when it was later sold. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, remember?" Everyone makes mistakes, and you seem to be focusing too much attention on mine."I've been handed a note that states you actually never sat in a Barnes and Noble and cried out that you hate books. You actually stole that story from your wife's family. I should have known that tale was possibly untrue since you eventually became a writer. This is another strike against you." I feel like a batter facing Sandy Koufax in his prime!"There were the occasions where you denied masturbating or watching pornographic movies because you thought that would hurt your pristine, virginal, good-guy image. There were also too many examples where you fibbed about your whereabouts, exaggerated your exploits and inflated how many people had purchased the books you wrote due to your low self-esteem."Now I feel like I am being roasted, but instead of comedians doing the dirty work it's you outlining everything in a more straight-laced way with serious undertones. Well, better to be roasted by you than by the guy who lives downstairs. That would be a different kind of roasting, and between you and me, I burn easily for an Italian.

"I am going to try and keep this as PG as possible, but there were the numerous nights you had pre-marital sex with your future wife. I know she was a beautiful woman. I understand that she had a curvaceous body and a vivacious smile. But pre-marital sex is pre-marital sex. It does not matter how much you loved her or longed for her. It is seen in a negative light."We're getting a little personal here. Gosh, I hope you do not mark me down for too much missionary in the early going. I was not experienced or equipped to do much more at that point of our relationship. Wait, what I mean..."I will not delve further into the story that your wife was your former best friend's ex-girlfriend and that your relationship with your wife ultimately ruined that dear friendship."

Good, because the last thing I want to do right now is have a debate about "guy code" with the guy of all guys."There were the evenings you secretly prayed I would take your ailing mother and bring her to Heaven because she was such a burden and you wanted to resume living a normal, active life. You did not heed your mother's words when she once told you in the midst of her suffering that I was keeping her alive to teach you

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further life lessons. You showed no faith in me, nor your mother." Please leave my mother out of this. I loved her more than anyone else. But the circumstances –

"I'm not done. The most sacrilegious thing you ever did was when you urinated on a church. I do not believe you were aware it was a church on that blustery, dark, alcohol-fueled evening, and I understand you were several blocks away from your car or a public rest room and your bulging bladder would not allow you to hold back any longer. But a church, my son? A church?" You're barely letting me get a word in edgewise! Attempting to butt in verbally with you is as difficult as entering the fray on a busy highway! Uh, oh. Did I just say all that out loud? "And what is amazing is after everything I have illustrated, I still want to welcome you into Heaven, Craig. For all of the things you have done that pained my soul and cracked my heart, the goods outweighed the bads by a million miles. You were a savior to your family, a wonderful ally to your friends, an employee that all of your bosses appreciated and, above all else, a human being that helped the world more than he hurt it. Your humor lifted people's spirits. The poems, fiction, children's stories and fantasy football columns you wrote were thought-provoking and entertaining for millions of readers. And you always treated everyone you came across with dignity and respect. Thank you for everything you accomplished while you were on Earth. Welcome to Heaven." Wow. I'm speechless. Well, maybe not speechless since I'm talking, but I'm rambling rather than speaking in sensical sentences. By the way, is "sensical" a word? I never see it listed in dictionaries, but if there is a word like nonsensical... "Just say thank you." Thank you. Thank you so much. I hope you never regretted allowing me to be created, and you will never regret allowing me passage into Heaven. I promise you. Can I see my family now? I have so much to tell them. Plus, I want to know if they witnessed everything I did with my life once they weren't around to share it with me, and if they were able to view it all in high-definition. I also want to walk my dog, Jeepers. I've missed holding onto his leash for dear life while his greyhound legs sprint to every spot he thinks is worthy to drop a deuce on. "You can do whatever you want from now on, including seeing your family and walking Jeepers. You have nothing to worry about. Your time here is infinite. Everything is at your disposal. You can barbecue and swim, gather your family and friends together for a gigantic supper, and sleep without the worry of an alarm waking you up." Sounds like Heaven. I'll just assume everything is on sale all the time at the Walmart up here, too. Thanks again for entry. Do I need a special pass or password?" No, Craig. Just walk in. The gates are here to your left. Enjoy your afterlife. Your family is anxiously awaiting your arrival." And that's that, I guess. Maybe I would shake God's hand. Maybe I'd hug him. Maybe he'd pull an Italian move and kiss me on both my cheeks. Maybe he'd offer wine and bread, or maybe he'd offer beer and burgers. I don't know. The bottom line is I think I'll get in. Even though I have my doubts about His existence, even though I waited to attend church monthly until I fell in love with my Catholic wife (at age 44), and even though I have faults and foibles that are not ideal for my inclusion, I think I'll get in. At least that's what I'll keep telling myself as I build up my resume' (and my wide array of negatives) between now and the time the casket closes.