

Cooper Stoughton

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Roadside America

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### An Urgent Drive

The majority of my memories from the COVID-19 pandemic stem from a different disease than what comes to mind for most people: cancer. Simultaneously as the global lockdown, my grandfather was struggling with the late stages of terminal lung cancer. My family had been consistently flying from Phoenix to the small town of Fort Scott, Kansas for a couple years prior to the pandemic. We made efforts to visit him following major procedures that attempted to slow the spread of the disease. However, once interstate travel was restricted in the spring of 2020, we had a much more difficult time getting to him.

On an early morning in September, while school had still not gone back in session, I woke up to my father relaying the devastating message that I knew I would hear eventually: “We have to pack up our luggage quickly and load up the van. Your grandpa is in the hospital and we need to see him as soon as possible”. According to the nurse who contacted my family, my grandfather was in critical condition suffering from heart failure and had between a few hours to a few days to live. His time left with us was limited and there was no way for us to book a flight on such short notice, so we were forced to take a roadtrip to Kansas in our 2012 Honda Odyssey.

My family took a very limited number of items with us. The bare necessities of clothing and toiletries were all we could think to pack in the short time we were home. We got out of town as fast as we could, feeling the weight of the invisible hourglass over our heads, ominously draining away the time we had left before it was too late. Stopping the van was not an option to

us at the moment, as we did not want to waste time on unnecessary stops or pick up illness and bring it into the hospital. Despite us speeding through the desert and likely breaking laws to cut down on time, it felt as though we were stationary. The collective anxiety in the car separated us from the space and time outside of the window.

It was quite a long and tense ride. Minutes felt like hours and miles felt like mere feet. Everyone was very ill-tempered, so we avoided having any unserious conversation. We tried to take our minds off of the situation that was both metaphorically and literally in front of our windshield, but it was simply impossible not to address. We feared the possibility of being too late, that we would be unable to get our final words in to my grandfather. I cursed the idea that we could not arrive in Kansas sooner because of plane travel being restricted, but thanked our ability to drive a car reliably across state lines. Despite our control of the Odyssey, it felt as though we had no control over our situation. This feeling of helplessness was only exaggerated as we continued to receive updates about my grandfather's worsening condition, adding to the already suffocating pressure of the situation.

After a short overnight stop in Amarillo, Texas, the rising sun signaled the final leg of our trip, a seven hour drive to Southeast Kansas. Despite tensions being high, we were all more comfortable knowing we were almost to our destination. For a while, my parents shared stories about my grandfather in remembrance of his life, stories that I had not heard before. I did not get the chance to know my grandfather as much as I would have liked to when I was growing up because of the distance from Arizona to Kansas, but I thought I knew him decently well. I had always known he was a proud American and Air Force Veteran. He got drafted to the military out of high school and afterwards forged a career in the trucking industry as well as a hobby in farming. I knew him to be strong willed and a hard worker, never backing down even when

times were tough. However, what I heard on this drive shaped a new understanding of his character for me.

My mother recalled an abundance of stories about my grandfather, one such when he heroically dived into office buildings to save essential papers for businesses following a massive flood while living in Pennsylvania. He was remembered to be a family man who loved to tell jokes and watch or play basketball when he was out of office. My mother remembered him having the innate ability to find passion for whatever he did, whether it was trucking, farming, or reading books. I additionally learned of his undiagnosed PTSD from being in Vietnam during the 60's, an issue that he silently struggled with for most of his adult life. I never knew my grandpa to be so caring and selfless, yet so vulnerable and unwilling to show it. I felt as though I had missed out on so many experiences with him at that moment. I wished I had made an effort to know him better and asked him more questions about his life. At the same time, though, I felt unexplainably closer to him than before.

We arrived at the hospital at around 5pm the day after we embarked on our journey; my grandfather was pronounced deceased at 5:34. Even though I did not get to see my grandfather for very long, I was incredibly grateful that we had a vehicle like the Odyssey that day to take us quickly, and without question of its reliability, from Arizona to Kansas. Despite all of the sanctions and restrictions placed on travel following the global shutdown, automobiles gave people the ability to continue moving around as they needed. As for my family, they gave us the ability to see my grandfather one last time. From this experience I feel much more inclined to get to know people better while they are still around. I have made a habit of staying in touch with other family members to ensure that I do not miss out on anything important in their lives. I have also made an active effort to embody some of the traits that I learned about my grandfather

during the trip. I see him as an even more inspiring man than I did before, and believe that learning from his footsteps will take me a long way in life, just as it did for him.