

FOOD FOR THE ROAD

Sometimes, a funeral can be a happy occasion. This isn't always the case, but when a person has lived a full life, connecting with others around them, their memorial can be a true celebration. That was certainly the case for the service I attended at the end of January 2025.

The location was several hundred miles from where I live, which meant a lot of time in the car with my wife. I love driving with Kelsey. It's a time we get to talk about movies or things we want in our dream home someday. (She wants a hobbit hole built into the side of a hill, but also a castle turret, and I'm hoping for an indoor hot tub.) or literally any topic that pops into our minds when she's not snuggled up with her pillow in the passenger seat. (I should point out in fairness that she is more than willing to drive for me when I find it a bit too hard to keep my eyes open.)

Our music this trip mostly alternated between Gordon Lightfoot, The Arrogant Worms, Jim Croce, Linda Ronstadt and the soundtrack to old Indiana Jones videogames. (The day after we returned home from the trip, the music app on my phone notified me that I listened to more Gordon Lightfoot in the month of January than 99.5% of people in the world.) There was a picturesque dusting of snow in the mountains north of Los Angeles and rain for much of the time we were in the valley. We were ahead of schedule in the afternoon so we stopped by a used bookstore that had a copy of the very first book I ever contributed to. The nice woman at the counter seemed very grateful that I brought her my ID and asked her permission before I signed it.

Small Life Goal Achieved!

Throughout the drive, Kels and I would move between holding hands or me resting mine on her knee so she could wrap both of her arms around mine until we had to shift and find a new comfortable position in our tiny car. It was a lot, but having Kelsey with me made it delightful.



We were celebrating my grandmother Christa Aartman, who was born in Berlin, Germany in 1943. I can only imagine what her early days after the war were like. She moved to the United States when she was 18, lived the stereotypical American Dream, spending her last several years traveling all over the world. I remember once I called her cell phone in the afternoon only to be told, "Daniel. I'm in Europe! It's 2 in the morning here!" I got into the habit of checking with my dad to see if she and my Opa were in the country before I called them or stopped by the house without warning.

The night she passed, I drew a sketch in her honor which my aunt and uncle were kind enough to use as a centerpiece for the service. One of Christa's neighbors greeted me with a gasp and a very enthusiastic, "YOU'RE the artist!" Quite lovely of her.

Christa was very warm and inviting, but she also had no problem making it clear when she was done having company. Without any preamble, she'd announce, "You know you should really be going. You got a lot of driving to do!" and I knew it was time to go whether I felt ready to be on the road or not. She was a bit more tactful when she was done listening to whatever topic I was discussing. She'd ask me about work and then sometimes when I was mid-sentence, she'd turn to my wife and declare in her thick German accent, "Zose are just the CUTEST earrings! You look just DAHLING!" I'm realizing in this moment that I'm going to miss calling my sister as I drove away so I could share the funniest moment from that day's interaction.

I was expecting a lot of what I saw at the memorial. There were about a hundred people gathered, including my cousins Hanneke and Ria who flew over from Holland, substantially farther than Kelsey and I traveled. There were some tears to be sure, but overall there seemed to be more laughter. The stories told into the microphone reflected more examples of her being particular and opinionated.

My uncle described buying first class tickets once to persuade her to go along for a trip she wasn't sure about. As she got off the plane, she announced she'd never again fly in anything less.

There were words of gratitude spoken for the way that loving Christa made my Opa a better, kinder and more patient man. We remember who he was before she came along.

It was a true celebration of her remarkable life.

One thing I did not expect that day was how much conversation there was about... food. When my uncle said that Christa preferred authentic German food like Der Wienerschnitzel, I assumed he was joking. Several other people confirmed this and shared examples of her refusing to eat anywhere else while she was out shopping with a friend or visiting the casino.

The meal served was meant to be authentic German cuisine; spiced sausage, sauerkraut, pasta and pork both cooked with plenty of onions. (I'm not sure if the Oreo cheesecake was authentic but it sure was delicious.) As the staff announced they were ready to serve everyone, my aunt said, "So we're all going to Wienerschnitzel now, right?"

Not a bad way to celebrate.

The memorial was in the late morning, which left Kelsey and I in northern California and free to make plans for the afternoon. I should add some geography context here. We live in Anaheim, California. Christa's service was in Ripon, roughly six hours north of us. Kelsey's dad lives in Redding, about four hours further north along the same freeway. We felt it would be well worth the extra time in the car to go see him and his lovely wife. We opened their front door to be greeted by five smiling faces, not just the two we were expecting. Kelsey's sister was there, along with our two youngest nephews. There are few joys in life that compare to watching my wife on the floor playing with little ones. The three year old was particularly excited to show us how far he could make his wooden airplane soar.

His Papa ordered pizza for all of us, which I think might be the most perfect food to enjoy when family is gathered together. And of course there was a pot of macaroni and cheese on the stove because it's hard to imagine any event involving toddlers that doesn't include mac-n-cheese.

It was close to midnight before we all went to bed, (The grown-ups at least. The littles weren't up that late.) My eyelids were growing heavier by the second, but it had been a pretty great day, and we spent lots of time with wonderful people.

I woke up to the clicking of gas burners and bacon sizzling in the pan on the stove. Kelsey's dad was preparing burritos for breakfast. He was positively beaming at the opportunity to cook for his little girl. He was also rather delighted by the wardrobe she'd chosen that day, a maroon sweatshirt with the logo for Folger's Burgers in his hometown of Ada, Oklahoma.

Kelsey's grandfather Lyndel often spoke about Folger's Burgers. They had quite the reputation in her family. We all knew how much he missed them. We talked about taking a road-trip just so he'd get to go to Folger's one last time. Unfortunately, that kind of travel just wasn't feasible for him. He passed away in 2020.

As it happened, Kelsey and I have some dear friends, Michael and Kaylee, whom we got to know in California before they moved to Oklahoma. Like a true mid-westerner, Michael has developed a passion for his barbecue and his smoker. When they got married in November of 2023, they asked me if I would officiate the ceremony. It was my absolute honor.

The theme of the wedding was Pixar's UP, (Objectively the greatest love story ever told on film.) We wrote original vows with quotes from Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas and in my speech, I told my favorite story about the two of them. Back when Michael and Kaylee were dating, they joined Kelsey and I for a vacation together to Denver, Colorado. (The first and so far only time I have ever eaten Bison Burgers.) We were in the hotel lobby playing my favorite party game, Taboo, in which you have to prompt your teammate to say a particular word or phrase. Michael had the word FIANCE. He proudly grinned and said, "Someday I'm going to make you this." Kaylee was grinning just as big when she answered, "PIZZA!"

As I write this now, Kaylee and Michael are expecting their first baby in a few months. I am enormously proud of their growing family, and they have already expressed their eagerness to introduce their child to “Aunt Kelsey and Uncle Danny.”



The wedding was not in Ada. In fact, it was several hours away, but it was still the closest we were likely to be, so we decided we would add a road trip to our plans and experience the legendary Folger's Burgers for ourselves, in honor of Kelsey's Pop. If we made it to the restaurant right when they opened, we

should be back **JUST** on time for our afternoon flight out of Tulsa. (Whether or not I received a speeding ticket from getting a bit too comfy on those wide open Midwest roads that we don't have here in California seems entirely irrelevant to me. Frankly, I'm surprised you would even bring it up.)

The restaurant is exactly what you might picture if you imagine a small town diner. A few small tables on either side of the door, a row of circular stools along a white laminate countertop with metal napkin dispensers and red ketchup bottles. A light up Coca-cola sign lists prices that don't appear to have changed in several years.

Kelsey enthusiastically explained the reason for our visit to the middle-aged server behind the counter; "We came from California and my grandparents always talked about this place, and my dad. They all grew up here and they said Folger's Burgers were the best, and we just couldn't visit Oklahoma without trying them for ourselves and we are just so excited to finally be here!"

The woman was... not rude by any means, but she definitely did not share my wife's enthusiasm. It wasn't hard to tell she'd prefer us to hurry up and order. Kelsey and I got two burgers each, and they were just as tasty as we'd been promised. We ate one at the counter and took the second to eat in the car, but I think we were barely past the Ada city limits before we had them finished. We bought a shirt for Kelsey and one for her Nonnie Drew who could not have been more delighted to receive it.



Just as Kelsey's dad was so delighted to see his daughter in his house in Redding wearing her sweatshirt from the place that meant so much to his parents.

Breakfast was filled with all the caring statements, "We're so glad you both made the trip." "It means so much to get to see you." "Everything worked out so perfectly." "We can't wait to see you again." "You know you're welcome here anytime."

Before we got back on the road, he made sure we weren't leaving empty-handed. For Kelsey, he had a big yellow bag of red Swedish Fish candies, a favorite they've both shared as long as I've known them. For me, he had a box of Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies. He'd given me a box the first Christmas I was around their family, and after I told him how much I love them, he frequently made a point to have some on hand when he knew he'd see me. He even had a box set out for me at our wedding.

I have a pretty thoughtful father-in-law.

With snacks ready to go, we set out on our ten hour drive down the length of the Golden State. I decided we had to make one more stop in Ripon to get some food for the road. There's a restaurant in the center of town called China Bowl, where my sister and I have been going with our Opa and Christa since we were kids. I remember the server... I'm only just now realizing that I don't know her name... She used to seem much younger than the people who worked in the kitchen. I've never been good at guessing someone's age by looking at them, but in my memories, she's barely an adult. I can't recall a single time in twenty years of visiting this same small restaurant that she wasn't there to bring plates of fried rice with sweet and sour chicken to our table.

This time, when I opened the door to see her smiling and standing behind the counter, I noticed the small patch of gray hair above her ear on either side. She was overseeing two new servers, each of whom looked to me barely more than teenagers. I observed the nods and the brief pauses as they took orders at someone's table, signs they were new to the job, still training and

focusing to make sure they got it right. It was a fitting sight in a way, one of those those come-full-circle moments.

At the risk of sounding dramatic, I'd been thinking it might be my last time in this restaurant. I'm not going to be driving to Ripon to see my grandparents anymore after all. To everything there is a season.

The woman recognized me the moment I stepped up to the counter, and her smile grew a bit brighter. She said my uncle had told her about Christa's passing. I told her how much Christa loved this place, but of course she already knew that. She saw Christa much more often I was able to over the years.

Now, China Bowl's fried won-tons have always been amazing, but somehow, that day, as I reflected on two decades of family meals, they were even more perfect. Sweet and sour dipping sauce, it turns out, is not the cleanest car-ride snack, but I was wearing a red shirt anyway. Besides, that's what laundry detergent is for.



Our final stop before home was Bakersfield, where Kelsey grew up and where many of her family members still live. She was craving some ice cream from Dewar's. This place is an experience. It's part mid-twentieth century soda fountain, with stools spaced along a circular counter in the center of a huge dining room. It's part candy shop decorated in bright colors and covered in a variety of sweets, namely their hand-made taffy in all sorts of flavors. There's also a moose on the wall. He wears a bow-tie and depending on the time of day, he sings for the guests.

We placed our orders, and while we waited, Kels showed me

the hallway filled with photographs and newspaper articles related to the Dewar family. Years ago, she worked in a custom framing store and her team had provided all of the intricate frames on display. She was very proud to show me which ones she'd mounted herself. They still do look quite immaculate.

Dewar's is another place where we usually gather with family. I have several photos in my phone of Kelsey eating ice cream in one of their booths, sister or niece or nephew pressed in close beside her. There's even a few photos of her Nonnie and Pop. It's the kind of place... and the kind of treat that just brings people together.

Kelsey got her Black and White Sundae (Hot fudge over chocolate and vanilla ice cream) and I had a surprisingly big sandwich made from snicker-doodle cookies. I finished the thing and thought... "That was a LOT of sugar."

We drove the last leg of our journey and made it to our apartment with enough time for me to take an hour long nap before my 11:00pm shift at my hotel. I chewed some antacids as a penance to my digestive system for all that I'd put it through, or more accurately for all that I'd put through it over the past 3 days. I told myself I'd go for a few miles' walk in the morning even though I was already pretty confident that once my shift was over, I wasn't going to want to do anything but sleep.

I had a prof in college once say that the meaning of life is food. I've echoed this philosophy a number of times. Not only is food one of the most essential and basic requirements for existing, it's the fundamental thing we work and strive to provide. Food brings people together, fosters community, gives us something to gather around.

This past weekend, food was the way we celebrated our family, and the way we remembered them. If food is what life is about... Then that sounds pretty good to me.

February 2025



I drew this sketch of My Opa and Christa in 2013. The words, in their native languages Dutch and German, read, "I love you. You make me so happy."