

NUCLEAR NUMBER: THE ORBIT OF FAMILIAL BONDS

Familial bonds are the electrons to our elemental identity. They orbit our lives. They define our character and behaviors. Most profoundly, they exert a force whether they exist or not. Like an atom that has a characteristic number of electrons, when its outermost shell is not full, the atom seeks an electron to complete it. This is how familial bonds have most impacted my life—the search for relationships that was supposed to exist, but did not, and still exerted a force so strong that it impacted my behavior, major life choices, and my sense of completeness.

Before exploring this outer shell, it is important to understand the innermost shell. The electrons in this shell have the strongest pull on the nucleus, which is true of my relationships with my mom, sister and grandmother—my *femily*. Like the first electron shell of an atom, I grew up with a limited number of core, loving, and unconditional bonds. They are the closest to me, the strongest bonds that, like the Kurc family in Georgia Hunter's "We Were the Lucky Ones," have sustained me and informed my perspective on the world. They are the people I turn to in hard times and those that are around the table to celebrate holidays and milestones.

It would take an unimaginable amount of energy and deliberate acts to remove these *femililal* bonds from my orbit. The Nazis tried to break Jewish families' bonds, but only death could remove the individual from one's orbit, and even then, the bond still exerted a force. This assiduous bond is poignantly illustrated through Selim, who the family believes is dead throughout the war, but, without proof, continue to look for him. When they find him after the war's end, their bond, while redefined, remains intact, especially for the nuclear family.

With my inner shell full, relationships with extended family filled my valence shell, but growing up, there was a key electron missing—my father. Like any halogen atom, I needed that critical electron to create stability, and without it, I was very reactive as I searched for it. My parents divorced when I was two, and my pilot father moved out of state three years later. When he managed to visit, I had a lot of electronegativity, wanting so badly to pull that bond in, but the reaction escaped me. Instead, my hurt and anger were highly reactive with my father's chemistry, and instead of pulling an electron in, I pushed it away.

This is a classic defense mechanism, and it would be in my maladaptive playbook until I graduated college. After graduation, I realized that if I ever wanted to really *know* my father, I would have to move closer to create the right circumstances for the bond to form. With that, I moved to Milwaukee, which was hours away from my *femiliy*, risked failure and more hurt, and ultimately, would determine my lifelong home (as I eventually married my Milwaukee-for-life husband). Initially, there were many dynamic interactions, but with enough reactants and stirring—tears, explanations, and some laughter—we yielded a bond, which provided long sought-after stability. Today, that bond is strong, but requires diligent energy to keep it orbiting.

I was not able to establish a healthy relationship with a significant other, until I had a healthy relationship with my father. This is much like Addy who could not give his heart to Eliska while his family was missing. As Hunter writes, "Eliska knew as well as [Addy] did that as long as his family was missing, he would never be able to commit himself fully to building a life with her—to put his whole heart into loving her." The desire for a father-daughter bond consumed my emotional bandwidth. I could not commit to building a life in Milwaukee with my now husband until the bond formed.

Adding my husband to my familial orbit, opened another electron shell, which then wanted more bonds—children. While I did not have children, those bonds were core to my identity as a woman and want-to-be mother. The process to form these bonds took nearly half a decade of living in emotionally fraught two-week, up-and-down cycles full of uncertainty, frustration, failure, loss, shots, and energy-zapping challenges. The force this exerted on my life is inestimable. I entered each treatment with hope. I left each failed step fractured, but not broken. Much like the Kurc family, we kept taking the next step, problem solving along the way, to reach our goal.

While the Kurcs fought for the survival of their existing family; we fought for the creation of our future family. As Hunter writes, “[t]here is nothing worse, not even the daily hell of the ghetto, than for a mother to live with such fear and uncertainty about the fates of her children.” While the bonds to our children were theoretical, the fear of never having that bond was very real. Infertility was our emotional ghetto.

Despite our fractures, we grew stronger, more resilient, and, in the end, more tightly bonded to each other and our children. In the book, Mila and Felicia grow closer and more resilient with each test to stay alive—whether together or separated—they build trust, understand each other without speaking, and have faith. While not as heroic, we similarly fought for our kids growing closer along the way and kept faith. Like Mila faced with her and her daughter’s grave, we ran toward our train to a family regardless of the financial risk and possible failure because we refused to give up on the life we wanted.

My familial bonds are akin to the Kurc’s insomuch as they push and pull my reactions to the around me. My *femilial* bonds form my strong foundation. My father-daughter bond provides inner stability. My husband and three children are my daily catalysts. Without these forces in my life, I would not be me—each an atavistic, elemental force, molding my character and directing my next steps.

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