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Dad Astra: My father, the moon and me

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When I got the call to say my dad was on his final breaths, the moment felt personal yet framed in a very specific genre.

My father was a moon man. He wasn't an astronaut. He didn't have the right stuff for that. No, he marketed the moon to Americans as a member of NASA's educational outreach program in the early 1960s. In his pinwale corduroy suit and aviator sunglasses, he was the Don Draper of lunar boosterism, spreading moon fever as he

drove the “Space Mobile” from school to Rotary Club to shopping mall, his briefcase filled with model rockets and blurry moon photos.

He brought the fever home with him, too, but instead of infecting us with facts and science, he turned the moon into myth. In his telling, the seas, or “maria,” were wondrous places. The Sea of Tranquility was turquoise and rimmed in pink sand like a margarita. The Sea of Nectar trembled like Jell-O. He borrowed the Valley of Lost Things from the Italian poet Ariosto, a place where all the lost things of Earth reappear: pyramids of lost thimbles rose under lunar trees draped in missing socks. The mists were made of lost innocence and lost love.



Dad in 1960 (Photo: Eric Trump/Supplied)

As I grew older and we grew apart, our common ground shrank until all we had left was the moon. Between the two of us, we'd practically memorised the Apollo 11 transcripts. When nothing else could set us jabbering, a lunar eclipse or a Strawberry Moon would. When our diverging politics or his angry alcoholism silenced us, a lunar landing anniversary got us talking. Through all the communication breakdowns of my teen years and beyond, we could rely on NASA-speak to get us through: "Houston, we have a problem"; "calm, cool, and collected"; "malfunction junction"; "sitting fat" – these verbal fossils reminded us of that glowing myth he'd created.

I've noticed that the relationships between fathers and sons, or father figures and figurative sons, are sometimes so fraught a universe is required to contain them; that sometimes without moons, comets, ringed planets – the destruction of a Death Star – it's impossible for them to communicate their feelings. This is why Neil Armstrong, played by Ryan Gosling in *First Man*, needs to reach the moon to mourn his lost child; why Bruce Willis in *Armageddon* needs to land on an asteroid to tell Ben Affleck he's the son he never had; why in Joyce's *Ulysses* Stephen Daedalus and Leopold Bloom, surrogate son and father, come together at last beneath the "heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit."

Outer space is a fountain of metaphor, and the father-and-son-in-space genre is part of that. Let's call it Dad Astra. In this narrative type, fathers and sons are in long-distance relationships. The chasms and fathoms of space symbolise the difficulty of contact. Earth's gravity is the burden of longing and regret; celestial desolation mirrors the pain father and son leave in their wake.



Ad Astra

A model of the Dad Astra genre is the 2019 movie Ad Astra, in which Roy McBride, played by Brad Pitt, travels to the stars in search of his prodigal father, H. Clifford, an astronaut played by an Old Testament Tommy Lee Jones. Cliff is living off the shoulder of Neptune, sulking after killing off his mutinous crew and sending out wrathful power surges that slam into Earth. It's up to Roy to talk sense to him.

Never has getting in touch with Dad been more complicated. Roy hits escape velocity to leave Earth and land on the moon. Then, he leapfrogs to Mars, where he broadcasts his voice to the skies around Neptune, like that other forsaken son whose father art in heaven: "Father, if you can hear me," Roy says, "I am attempting to communicate with you... I'd like to see you again... I hope we can reconnect. Your loving son."

He then hijacks a spacecraft to Neptune, and like Telemachus searching the Mediterranean's oceanic cosmos for news of his missing father Odysseus, Roy plies the velvet-dark cosmic ocean for news of his father. As he drifts, he thinks of Cliff, explorer of "strange and distant worlds... they were beautiful, magnificent."

When the two finally meet, Cliff has a billion-yard stare and just wants to be left alone, like Dad in the garage with his minifridge. Roy travels to the outer planets to find a father he thought was dead to be told, "I never cared about you or your mother or your small ideas... I found my destiny, so I abandoned my son."

Ouch. Eventually, Roy and Cliff float weightlessly through space, tethered by a thin cord. “Let me go,” growls Cliff, and Roy obeys. As he watches his father recede into the void, only the cosmos is big enough to contain his anguished howl.

So, three years ago, when I received the call that my father was on his last breaths, I knew the moment was personal yet framed in genre. We were separated by an ocean, half a continent, and Covid travel restrictions. We hadn’t seen one another in years. He was in Canada. I was in New Zealand, “not quite the moon, but after the moon... the farthest place in the world,” according to Austrian philosopher Karl Popper.

I knew the sun had set over Canada, the sky above alight with a waxing gibbous moon he could not see with eyes in a body that maybe already he could not feel. When his girlfriend put the phone to his ear, I heard the crackling silence of the electrical signals tethering us. I thought of all those magnificent lunar seas he’d conjured, the beautiful Valley of Lost Things, where maybe now his drifting mind was searching for the thing only he knew he was missing. There was only one way to say goodbye.

“I copy you on the ground, Dad. You take it easy on the lunar surface.”

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