

Astro-Dad

By ReadWorks

When he first began, the best thing about my dad working as an astronaut for NASA seemed to be that he would leave me alone. We had always clashed: he called me a “smart aleck,” and all he appeared to care about was whether or not I did my science and math homework. I could be out late, going to parties, and getting into trouble, and he wouldn’t even bat an eye so long as I finished my chemistry homework. Meanwhile, I was terrible at both math and science; my best grades were in English.

About five years ago, he was put on an assignment to go up to the International Space Station and do some repairs along with a team from China. He was very excited about it and had to get in really good shape to prepare for the “mission,” as he called it. He and my mom would wake up early, before my brother or I, and go on long runs. He lost quite a lot of weight, and relatively quickly.

I would bug him about the mission at dinner, asking questions like, “So how will you even communicate with the rest of the team? You don’t speak Chinese,” and, “What happens if you’re fixing something up there in space, and something messes up, and you get cut off from the space station?”

He would just smile knowingly, smirk at my mom, and ask if I had finished my physics homework yet.

The truth of it was that I was kind of jealous of him. How many people get to go up to space and see Earth from such an incredible perspective? Can you even imagine being thrust up into the atmosphere in a metal box? Being so far away from your own planet, but also so close to it that you feel like you could hold it in your hand?

But my dad made things difficult, and by the time the day of his launch came, I was more than ready to see him go.

“Be good, Jason,” he said, giving me a one-armed hug in a room off the launch site.

“You too,” I mumbled.

“Take care of your mom and brother.”

I nodded, and he moved on to kiss Timothy’s forehead.

We had said our actual goodbyes the night before, at a big party that my mom had thrown for him with all his family and friends. She’d made hamburgers on the grill, and barbecued some steaks—food my dad definitely was not going to be eating for the next few weeks. After everyone had left and the barbeque was cleaned, he gave me a letter in an envelope, telling me not to open it until after I got home from the launch.

My mom was crying, and my dad hugged her tightly. “I’ll get in touch as soon as I can,” he said. “But just call Nadene if you’re worried at all.” He gestured across the room of families

who were about to watch someone fly up into space to where Nadene, the family liaison, was standing with a clipboard pressed to her chest.

And that was it. The astronauts were called to get into their protective gear, and the families—mostly wives and kids, but also one husband—huddled together by the window for a few hours, watching final preparations for the launch.

I spent the time playing gin rummy with Timothy. I looked over a few times at my mom, though, to make sure she was doing okay. At a certain point, she made her way over to a group of adults in the corner.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” I said.

Timothy shrugged, staring intently at the cards in his hand.

One of the women moved to the side to let my mom into their circle, and gave her a big hug.

I couldn’t hear much, so I turned back to my cards and reflected on how nice it was to have some downtime without being asked about my algebra exam.

When it was time for the launch, the crowd in the family room moved toward the big windows facing the site. Nadene stood to the side, sharing information about what was going on and pointing as all the astronauts, indistinguishable from each other, walked out to the shuttle and disappeared into its depths.

There was a loud roaring sound, and the shuttle was fired up. Smoke burst from the bottom as it slowly lifted off the ground. Everyone in the room started clapping, but there was so much noise outside that I couldn’t even hear the sounds. Everything looked surreal inside the room—the people’s faces lit up orange and red, their eyes wide, as they watched their loved ones disappear.

We were quiet on the way home. It was kind of difficult to ignore my mom, who had tears streaming down her face, but she didn’t seem to want to talk to us, and just snapped if I asked if there was anything I could do.

When we got home, my mom called Aunt Lisa, and Timothy turned on his baseball video game. I’m not sure he really understood the magnitude of what was going on, that our dad was hundreds of miles above us and wouldn’t be coming home for two whole weeks.

I went to my room and sat on my bed, staring at the little white envelope that my dad had given me the night before. It had seemed so incongruous then, just a silly note my dad had passed to me while I was trying to fall asleep. But now it seemed more important, in a way. He was on a crazy adventure—what if he didn’t come back? This was a possibility I had not considered at all in the months and years leading up to his launch, but now it hit me in a very real way.

I put the envelope under my pillow and stared at the ceiling. This was going to be a long two weeks.

That night, dinner was quiet. My mom ordered in some pizza, and we all just kind of picked at it.

“What do you think Dad is eating for dinner?” Timothy asked.

“Probably some sort of frozen meat powder,” I said.

Mom raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

I took a big bite of pizza, finishing the slice. “May I please be excused?” I asked.

When my mom nodded, a bit dejected, I threw the paper plate away and headed upstairs to my room. I pulled the envelope out from under the pillow and thought about whether to open it. I decided I would the night before my dad returned to Earth.