**Leaving Earth**

Dagne Forrest

Last fall I read about an asteroid that may actually be a rocket booster from a failed mission in 1966. Surveyor 2 launched the year before my parents met, when my world wasn't even roughed out in pencil on the edges of a notebook or map. The uncrewed lander was meant to touch down on the moon but crash-landed instead, its Centaur rocket flying solo and gaining orbit around the sun, closely shadowing our own run.

Although the earth's gravitational orbit was expected to capture it briefly, the rocket will pull away in a few months' time, returning to an orbit of its own. What does that mean for the rocket, shuttling through space much like a piece of rock? Corrosion doesn't occur in deep space, where the absence of oxygen allows metal to live on and the rocket doesn't rely on any moving parts or technology for its perambulations. I assume it can just trundle on for a very long time, maintaining its essential shape and features, its essential 1966-ness.

When the rocket left earth, it took with it the intense focus and attention of teams of people who made it possible. NASA's "workhorse of space" came about after years of development, including the efforts of teams of engineers at Pratt & Whitney, the aircraft company which made the RL-10 engines which powered the Centaur. My dad was a test engineer with Pratt & Whitney in the 1960s, at the same time the Centaur was being designed, built, tested, and launched.

Obsessed with fixing cars in his downtime and redesigning cars on paper, I'm not aware that my dad paid much attention to the American space program. In fact, the 1960s, when he was in his twenties, covered an awful lot of ground for him, road tripping from his home in Winnipeg to California and back, riding the rails as a porter across Canada one season, studying mechanical engineering at the University of Manitoba, and later working for Pratt & Whitney.

He was famous in the family for having to take his first-year courses three times as he was too busy living and partying to focus on his studies. This has always amazed me, as the father I remember was quite correct and rigid in many ways, and after becoming a type one diabetic in his early thirties he stopped drinking entirely. A slice of pie became his big indulgence.

The man I knew had given up working on his own cars as a hobby, and no longer sketched or re-imagined cars. In his professional life he had shifted into air quality for buildings, moving further away from his original work on engines. The only vestiges of his love of cars and movement remained in the day trips he and my mum loved to take, and his religious care of any car that he owned. A weekly trip to the carwash a date he never missed, and he scrupulously maintained mileage records by hand for each car he owned.

After years of clashing, particularly when I was a teenager, our own personal orbits dovetailed most perfectly when I had my first child. My parents came to stay with us in England, where my husband and I were living at the time, and I was thrilled to discover that my dad's tendency to rise daily at 4:30am was a pretty ideal match for life with a newborn. We spent quiet hours together talking as he cuddled his first grandchild.

He would leave us for good, much too soon, just a few years later. By then we had moved back to Canada and he loved looking at Richard Scarry's classic book *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go* and taking walks to the fire station with his first grandchild, who was equally smitten with all forms of transport. That grandchild has since grown into a young adult who has already travelled once around the world, including driving across the girth of the Eurasian continent, and who is rebuilding a vintage sports car with obsessive precision in our garage while figuring out where to go in life. In some ways, it's a bit like getting to know my dad as he would have been in his twenties, though they are not the same person.

To connect with my dad, I'm not drawn to revisiting his hometown and places he knew, many of which have altered anyway. I don't find it meaningful to visit his grave, that cinematic symbol for communing with those we've lost. He was never there; it holds no significance to his life.

Instead, these days I'm tugged back to that rocket masquerading as an asteroid. The rocket that avoided crash landing on the moon, or being sunk in the spacecraft cemetery in the Pacific Ocean, or even being relegated to a graveyard orbit with other space junk. The rocket that lives on as an endless roadtripper, both a part of and very far away from 1966, the year it left this earth, carrying with it the aspirations and dreams of so many, including a young test engineer who would one day become my dad.