Man in the Moon

Molly McGrane*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2000 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Man in the Moon

I don't remember when the man in the moon started talking to me, but I know I was fairly young. It doesn't seem like there was ever a time in my childhood when he didn't answer my questions or tell me jokes.

Every night after dinner, my dad and I did dishes and went out to the front steps to relax. We didn't have a front porch, we just had two steps to sit on. He always had a Busch Light, unless something better was on sale at Hy-Vee the week before. On nights we couldn't see the moon, my dad and I usually chatted until it was time for me to go to bed. We never ran out of things to talk about. If the conversation slowed, we just gave names to all the cars that passed on the street.

On the nights that the moon was out, my dad and I rarely talked. He sat and watched cars until I would say hello to the man in the moon, who was always happy to talk to me.

"Hi, up there!"

"Hello, down there!"

Our conversations began the same every night. Then he would ask me about school, or baseball, or piano lessons. I liked to ask him about himself every now and then.

"Do you ever get lonely up there all by yourself?"

"No, I have lots of little friends up here in the sky, and nice people like you down there."

"Do you ever get hungry up there?"

"Nope! There's a nice lady up here that cooks good hamburger gravy."

"Oh. My mom makes hamburger gravy, but I hate it."

The man in the moon taught me about the planets, the sun, and the rest of the universe. He had an answer for everything.
I don't remember if I ever really believed that the man in the moon was actually talking to me, even when I was very young. My dad was a terrible ventriloquist. All he ever did was clench his teeth and try to talk out of one side of his mouth. I'm sure my dad knew I didn't believe it. Even when I was in elementary school, old enough to know what was real and what wasn't, we still had our nights on the front steps, and I continued to talk to the moon.

Everyone knew I was a Daddy's Girl. My two brothers and two sisters never seemed to mind. My mom liked that I was so close to my dad. Dawn Paggett, my best friend until junior high, lived across the street from us. She was as much as a Daddy's Girl as I was. We both knew how to get what we wanted from our own dads and each other's dads. Whether it was trips to Hardees, piggyback rides, or wagon rides to the Kenwood Park, all we ever needed was our puppy-eyed look and our dads could not refuse us.

Kenwood Park was only three blocks away from my house. To me, it was a huge field with limitless possibilities for adventure. In reality, it covered an area less than one city block. There were two picnic tables that were rarely used for anything besides as hurdles or ramps. The only pieces of playground equipment were a slide, two swings, and a tiny jungle gym. One afternoon, Dawn and I coerced my dad into walking us down to the park. I was climbing a tree while Dawn played tag with some other kids. Suddenly, Dawn started screaming and ran back to where my dad was sitting. I jumped down from the tree to find out what was wrong.

“There’s a man! Down in the sewer!” she shrieked.

I think most dads would have assured the little girls that there was no
man in the sewer, but my dad said we should go check it out. The three of us slowly walked over to the sewer grate, all holding hands. Dawn wouldn't get any closer than a couple yards, but I got down on my belly and slithered over to the grating that covered the sewer.

“Hello?” I yelled. There was no answer, so I picked up some gravel and dropped into the sewer.

A deep voice finally answered, “Stop throwing rocks at me!”

Dawn immediately looked relieved. We both giggled and gathered more rocks and sticks to throw at the man. Oddly enough, the voice seemed to come from above ground. And the man in the sewer sounded quite a bit like the man in the moon. My dad grinned as we started throwing more rocks down and yelled at the voice to never scare us like that again.

“Sorry, ladies,” the deep voice answered.

Every time we went to the park with my dad after that day, Dawn and I always ran straight to the sewer grating. Once in a while, we brought M&Ms to throw at the man. Some days we didn't even play. We just sat and talked to the man in the sewer, asking him all kinds of questions. He taught us where the water goes when you flush the toilet. He also told us stories about creatures that lived down in the sewer, until I started having nightmares.

Sometimes Dawn’s dad took us to the park. We tried to get him to do the voice of the man down below, but it just wasn’t the same. He couldn’t make his voice deep enough. He wasn’t half as funny as my dad, either.

On days that Dawn didn’t go to the park with us, my dad and I went by ourselves. We usually left the man in the sewer alone to pursue other
things. Most of the time, we both just brought books to read. My favorite place to read was on top of a rock. I liked the rock because from a certain angle, it looked like a happy face. It stood barely three feet high, but when I was smaller it was sometimes difficult to climb. My dad would quietly let me struggle for a minute before scooping me up and setting me on top.

One afternoon, he forgot to bring a book of his own. I only had one Choose Your Own Adventure book that I didn’t want to share. He seemed content for a short time, watching cars drive by or kids fight over the slide. He complained that he wanted to leave, but I insisted that I wanted to finish the book I was reading. The library had a program that awarded prizes, like vouchers for free baseball tickets, ice cream cones, or even a bicycle to the top readers over the summer. I took the contest seriously.

“Why are you sitting on my head?” a voice suddenly demanded.

I dropped my book and looked around, startled. My dad was looking toward the street. He glanced back at me. “Don’t look at me!” he said, unsmiling.

I went back to my reading. A few seconds later, the voice shouted at me again. “You’re messing up my hair!”

“Rocks don’t have hair, Dad,” I giggled.

His eyes grew large and he tried to look surprised. “What are you talking about? Of course they don’t have hair!”

I waited expectantly for the voice to say something else, but it didn’t. I eventually got bored waiting, and my mind was no longer on my book. I jumped down from the rock to go back home.
“Ahh, that’s better! Wait, where are you going?”

“Stop it, Dad. I know it’s you!”

My dad threw his hands in the air. “For the last time, I didn’t say anything! Are we going to have to get your ears checked?”

I rolled my eyes and climbed back on the rock. “OK if I sit here?”

“Sure, just move your foot off my nose so I can breathe.”

I moved my foot off the hump that I always claimed was the nose of the happy face to sit cross-legged. “So what’s your name?”

I guess the rock wasn’t expecting that question, because there was a pause before the deep voice answered, “I don’t know, Rock, I suppose.”

“Rock? Come on, Dad, you can do better than that.”

My dad glanced over his shoulder at me. “If you don’t quit talking nonsense, we’re going straight home. And I won’t feed you tonight.”

“Sorry, Dad.” I sat motionless until the rock spoke again.

“Well, what’s your name, little girl?”

“Little Girl,” I replied. I looked over at my dad, who had his back to me. His shoulders were shaking, a sure sign that he was laughing.

The rock started asking me questions about myself. I told him how much I liked my second-grade teacher, Ms. Woods. He told me that he knew my parents really well, and that they bragged about me all the time. I asked the rock which of my brothers and sisters my parents loved most, but he wouldn’t tell me. He seemed to get angry when I told him how often my older bother knocked me down and sat on me.

After dinner that night, my dad and I headed out to the front steps. The moon was almost full, so I spent the night telling the man in the moon about the new friend I had met at the park. He was happy for me,
but just a little worried that I wouldn’t talk to him as often if I kept making new friends.

I don’t remember when I stopped talking to the man in the moon. As I graduated from elementary school to junior high, our conversations grew rarer. Dawn and I were old enough to go to the park by ourselves, so the man in the sewer and the rock were silenced. Gradually, the voices stopped altogether.

My dad and I still talked out on the steps nearly every night for a few more years, but I talked directly to him, not the man in the moon. When I was old enough to start getting homework, I spent my time after dinner working at my desk, not outside with my dad. Our nighttime tradition ended.

There was a full moon the night after my dad died. I hadn’t thought of the man in the moon for several years. As I paced around the yard, I tried to remember the way my dad sounded when he did his voices. I closed my eyes. “Hello, up there,” I whispered to the moon. There was no response. When I couldn’t remember what his voice sounded like, I cried for what had to have been the hundredth time that day.

My sister and I watched home videos from family vacations all night. Most of the videos had my mom’s voice. Finally, we found one when my dad had gotten hold of the camera and narrated. It was our trip to the Badlands in South Dakota. My dad wandered around, holding the camera, making comments about the other tourists. He spoke quietly and chuckled at his own jokes.

“Guess I should find the wife and kids. Make sure prairie dogs didn’t
get at them. They're vicious up here."

The camera bounced as my dad walked to the edge of a cliff and scanned the area below him. He settled on two figures struggling up a ledge forty feet below him. The screen zoomed in on my brother and I.

"Hello, down there!" my dad called in his deep voice.

"Hello, up there!" I shouted back.

A wave of relief swept over me as I listened to my dad and I banter back and forth on the video. After the tape ended, I walked back outside to the front steps. I sat for an hour or so, finally remembering all his voices and the inside jokes and games we had while I was growing up. It hit me pretty hard when I realized all that I was losing. But it was somehow comforting to know that I could think of my dad every time I looked up to the sky. Before I went inside I said a quick prayer to the man in the moon and asked him to help me hear his voice everywhere I went.