

Readers of internet postings about amateur astronomy may wonder whether any of us have a life. I wouldn't want to go making rash statements, but occasionally, when the Moon is full or nearly so, I try. On the evening of Friday, October 9, 1998, after ballroom dance practice and a late dinner at Pizz'a Chicago (a "Joliet Jake" -- four kinds of mushrooms, apricots, and fresh basil -- yum! -- and what's more, they deliver), my date and I stopped at my place briefly, so I could hand off some books related to English Regency costuming.

I had laid my wicked plans most carefully, so that we could not even get through the front door without tripping over the Vixen 70 mm fluorite, all set up for one-hand carry on its altazimuth mount, with an eyepiece and diagonal already in the focuser. The lady recognized the scenario, for we had attended a star party earlier this year, with Refractor Red. Yet there was one showpiece object we had missed...

"I don't WANT to look at Saturn!" she said, tightly clenching her fists and stamping her dainty feet. I was impressed. She's a nurse, and one of her regular patients is a two-year-old. They have been learning from each other. "I don't WANT to! I've seen pictures taken with bigger telescopes, and closer up!"

"Trust me," I replied, as soothingly as I could.

"NO!!" How flattering -- she has been learning from me, too. But I had the car keys, so we carried the little refractor outside. I was glad I had set things up for a quick trip, for the night was cool, and her costume, composed mostly of net and neckline, was only keeping one of us warm. At least it was black, so stray light reflected just from her lustrous skin.

The eyepiece was an 8-24 mm Vixen zoom, and Saturn lay well up in the southern sky. Within fifteen seconds I had the ringed planet centered in a 70x field. I reminded her where the focus knob was, and stepped aside.

"Oh..." she said softly, and there followed a long pause. "It glows!" I just chuckled quietly, as she continued. "I mean, it's white -- like the Moon. And you can really see it!" She was smiling broadly now, much happier. As was I. Yet it was chilly, and she did have to be on her way, so we did not linger at the telescope.

So I hope I get credit for trying to have a life. And perhaps my hobby does help a little bit. For as I told my date, any man can promise her the Moon and stars, but when it comes to astronomers -- we deliver.

