THIS (STARGAZING) LIFE

NATHAN DUNNE

Several years ago, on an evening walk, I met a man named Gus. He was looking through a telescope. The moon was full in the sky. In the half-light, Gus squinted into the lens, urging me to join him in gazing up at "the big damn oblivion".

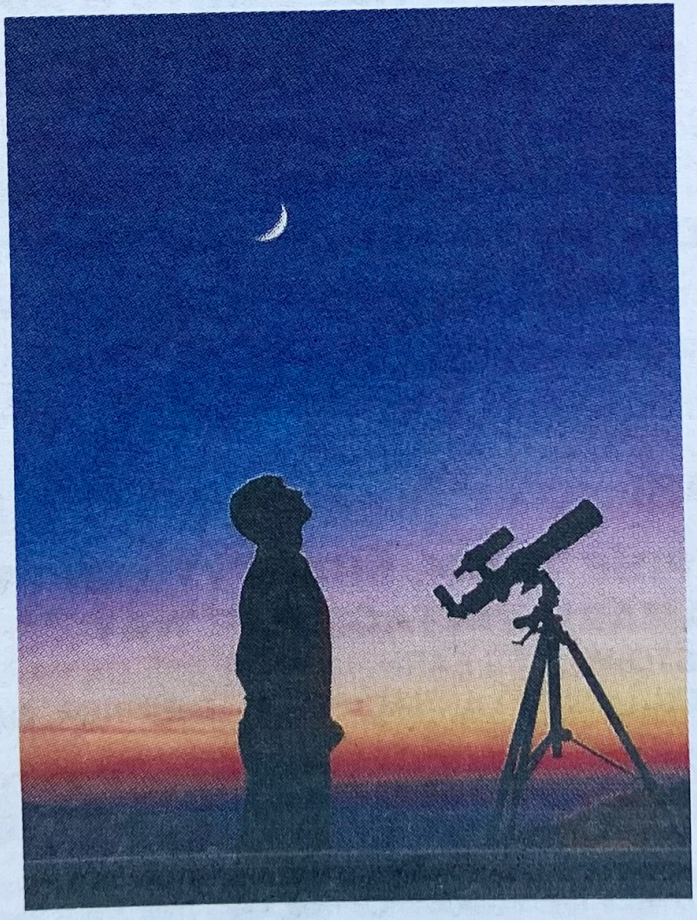
His voice was hoarse with old-age and bourbon. Gus told me how much he loved looking at the moon, especially on clear nights when you can see all the craters and shadows. He said it cured his loneliness to be out among the stars. Being a widower was tough. Canned food, bad shoes and nothing on TV but those reality show weirdos.

His wife Brenda was gone ten years now. Said goodbye to her on the third floor at the Royal. Cancer was a tragedy, a real bastard.

"She went out slowly," Gus said. "Didn't even know who I was in the end. She kept asking about the mortgage, which was strange because we paid the whole thing off years back."

Looking through Gus's telescope, the sky opened up. It pulled me in. Mars was being shifty, its red dot moving in and out of dark pockets. The stars were ripe, and the Southern Cross unmistakeable.

Gus walked with a cane, and as I squinted at the night, he pointed his stick at the stars, messing with the view, laughing and laughing.



"I wish I studied astronomy," he said, his face growing sombre. "But it's too late now." I looked at him dead-on. "Maybe there's still time?"

Gus packed away his telescope and told me about his pyjamas. He called them "crispies" because of how soft they were.

Nothing better, he said, than getting into your crispies with a glass of Jack Daniels. Helps a person sleep. No cancer when you're asleep, only dreams.

We said goodbye. See you around. Nice to talk to someone about the moon.

Months passed, and I looked for Gus often. I had more questions: Where did he get his telescope? What car did he drive? What was his favourite planet? How did he rate Earth? But I never saw him again. I figured he was just gazing up at the stars from a different vantage point. Then on election day, in line to vote earlier this year, I heard about a guy from the neighbourhood who recently died. Old Gus. He went out suddenly, in the garden, with his shoes on. When they found him, the shovel was still in his hand.

Inspired by Gus, I recently bought my own telescope and took it down by the canal to look at the moon. All those craters and shapes are still there, moving ever so slightly among the stars – "the big damn oblivion".

***Review** considers original submissions for This Life of 450-500 words. Work may be edited for clarity. Email: thislife@theaustralian.com.au*

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