



Jupiter then."

"Yes, that was me." They shake hands.
"Tonight it's the Moon. Take a look."

He does. A woman with red hair and a knee-length coat walks up.

"Can I look? Cool." She puts her eye on the lens. "Whoa! How cool!"

"Yes it is, and it's yours," Jacobs says.

"Oh. Wow. Wow! It looks so close."

"It's about 240,000 miles away."

"Can you see more the higher you are? I used to live in Santa Fe and I'd see maybe 15 shooting stars a night," she says.

"Were they in August or November?"

"I guess November."

"They're called the Leonids." He explains the Leonid meteor shower and hands her the leaflet.

"One more question. Is the Moon in waning gibbous or waxing gibbous phase?"

"Good question! It's waxing."

"Thank you!" She walks away backward, then whirls. "Goodbye!"

Another woman strides by with a yellow Labrador retriever on a leash. The lab wears a pumpkin-colored bandana tied around its neck that vaguely matches the woman's baseball cap and jacket. The dog sniffs around the scope's mount.

"What is that?"

"A telescope. We're looking at the

Moon." She peers down the tube. "Lean over here, look into the eyepiece."

"Wow!"

"That's the right noise."

"Wow! What's so different about it tonight?"

"Just that I'm here with a high-powered telescope."

"Only in New York could you come outside and see a telescope and an astronomer on the corner of the street," she says, the dog pulling her away to sniff at trees.

"Thanks for doing that. That's very great."

"What are you looking at?" a young man in a dark ski cap asks.

"We're looking at the Moon."

"Does it cost anything?" Jacobs shakes his head and re-centers the scope.

"Nothing in this city is free."

"This is."

"Cool." He looks. "Amazing! Quick question. I'm looking for Greenwich Avenue and Perry."

"Go straight up here. Turn left at the old women's prison."

"There's a women's prison here?"

"Was. It's a park now."

"What prompted you to do this?"

Jacobs tells him about John Dobson. A one-time monk, Dobson, 92, built his first telescope in 1956 out of a junk-store lens

and an eyepiece salvaged from Zeiss binoculars. Then he turned it on the third-quarter Moon and thought, "Everybody's got to see this." So Dobson carted his telescope to the sidewalk, and handed out plans for building cheap scopes using trashed cardboard tubes, hand-ground mirrors, and the simple "alt-azimuth" mount that's now named after him.

"He challenged other astronomers to take their scopes out of their backyards and onto the street corner, and be a public service," Jacobs says. "To talk about the universe and remind people where we live. Because what we see every day is nothing like where we really live."

Where we really live is not this small intersection in the Village. Where we really live is on a blue-and-white planet, orbited by a pitted gray moon, orbiting a yellow star, which orbits a spiral galaxy inside a vast universe. On some nights, sidewalk astronomers come out with the Moon to walk in John Dobson's shoes and remind people that the place where they really live might even be as big and fascinating as New York City on a Thursday night. ■

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EXTRA**

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