



Source: James Kanter and Craig S. Smith, 'French boost troops for Lebanon', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 25/08/06.

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Sometimes in the summer, when I've had a couple of glasses of wine, I like to go out in the backyard and look at the stars. I have a look for Orion's Belt, for the Southern Cross, the Saucepan, you know, the easy ones that you learn as a kid on camping holidays. I squint at Mars. Is it red? Red-ish. It's blurry too, like there are two planets close together but I guess that could just be my eyesight.

Sometimes my dad or my friend Sylvie rings up to let me know that the International Space Station is going overhead. They know the precise time, like 6.37 to 6.39pm, or 8.13 to 8.16, or some such. The timing is pinpoint accurate. They both check the NASA website, which gives the coordinates and other details. But that doesn't mean that I have confidence that it will be there. What if I'm looking at the wrong part of the sky? (Hey, it's big. You try looking all over the place at 6.37 or 8.13 and you'll see what I mean.) So there I am in the backyard on the cordless phone to both my parents—Dad in his garden, Mum looking out from upstairs bedroom window, one phone each. We'll be talking about how hopeless it is to find the ISS and whether it'll be coming north to south or east to west and trying not to be disappointed and saying 'nup, nothing, no, which way is it meant to be heading, are you sure of the time, no, WAIT OH THERE IT IS THERE WOW THERE DO YOU SEE IT?' and a bead of blue will go smoothly in an arc over our heads and, at the precise time given by the NASA website, it will disappear again. So exciting. Then we'll hang up and I'll start to become conscious of the noise coming from the unhappy family next door and the mozzies have found me and it'll feel a bit chilly so that's cooled the enthusiasm. Plus there's nothing else to look at now that I've found the Saucepan and the Southern Cross and the three stars of Orion's Belt, so it's over and I go inside.

I am a slacker when it comes to looking at stars but I like the certainty of them and thinking about the age of them, and how that twinkling, that beam of light that I am looking at was sent out years and years ago and has made its way through space and I could witness it at that moment. It makes me think that somehow we are in this chain of time and that if there is a past and a present then a future too. As I said, the star gazing scenario always

comes with wine.

Late last night was a different celestial experience. The news came through that 2500 scientists who make up the International Astronomical Union voted to strip Pluto of its planetary status. Apparently it is too small and it doesn't control an orbit. On the TV news, one astronomer said that Pluto 'did not deserve to be called a planet'. This is quite a turnaround. After all it has been called a planet since it was discovered in 1930. And we have grown up being instructed about the order of the solar system, and our place in it: Mercury, Venus, EARTH, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.

My sister-in-law knows the order of the planets. She has worked out a very good mnemonic for them, better than 'my very excellent mother just sent us nine pizzas,' or 'Most voters earn money just showing up near polls'. I can't remember what hers is and she is on the other side of the world now so I can't ask her. However, we can be sure that there are no more pizzas for my very excellent mother and the polls have gone from the nearby voters too. I'm not the only one shaken by this change. Apparently the International Astronomical Union has received hate mail. An extreme response to be sure, but I'm not surprised. Nobody likes to go to bed and wake up with some bozos having changed the order of the universe overnight.

Where does that leave the happy phrase 'God's in his heavens, all's right with the world'? Well, the heavens are changing, there's a new cosmic order, no fool would consider that all is right with the world and our schoolyard mnemonics are in tatters. I wish I felt more hopeful. I wish things were more secure. I wish I knew more constellations. My sister-in-law is still in the northern hemisphere. Perhaps she will look out her backyard tonight, after a few glasses of wine, and look in the summer night sky for the three star belt, for the red star and perhaps for a small icy dwarf planet that once had a place in the celestial hierarchy.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Kate Latimer.*