

It's going, going, gone for the ninth planet

Space....the Final Frontier...
 These are the voyages of the Starship Offbeat. Its weekly mission to explore strange new topics, seek out new life in old jokes...to boldly go where *no* humor column has gone before!

Naa NAH...na na na na na...
 Columnist's log: Star date 2007-01-19. We're now in orbit around Pluto...yes, Pluto — the only combination Disney character/planet known to man.

In case you're one of those folks who think astronomy has something to do with your horoscope, the powers that be in some shadowy group of grouchy scientists known as the International Astronomical Union — who knew these guys were *unionized*? — have decreed that Pluto, a planet in good standing since being discovered by — I kid you not — some guy named Clyde in 1930, apparently failed to pay its IAU union dues and was booted out of the ranks of planetdom on a technicality.

The nerve! I mean, poor Pluto. A cute 11-year-old girl from England helped come up with the *name* Pluto, for cryin' out loud! (Well, she was probably cute, anyway.)

I don't suppose these union card-carrying, conniving cosmos controllers considered the possibility that the inhabitants of Pluto — most of whom do, in fact, resemble Disney's famed animated bloodhound — might be P.O.'d about their sudden demotion and could be here any minute to blast the IAU union hall to smithereenies with their Plutonium Death Ray! C'mon guys...you're eggheads: Think this stuff through, will ya?

Truth: I actually entertained thoughts of being an astronomer during childhood. Spent many a pleasant evening laying on my back, peering through my small telescope at the moon...the planets...the stars...the comets...and the neighbors' bathroom window. (Oh, I'm just kidding - I never *really* saw any comets.)

Then, during my early teens, reality hit like a meteorite: In addition to looking at really cool stuff through expensive telescopes, there's also math involved. Serious math. Long equations with way more letters than numbers. Nasty math.

So I quickly turned to journalism, where the only math involves counting words and exaggerating expense reports.

So, like you, I had at least a passing inter-

est in the whole Pluto controversy. Unlike you, however, my brother-in-law worked very hard as part of a team to launch NASA's "New Horizons" Pluto probe.

To the regular planet Pluto...not to one of the seven cosmic dwarves.

So now it's personal. I mean, just imagine you're poor Tim. Not only do you have to put up with a brother-in-law writing goofy things about you in the paper, but you're really smart and you just spent a couple of years of your life working at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Lab on this Pluto probe.

It's successfully launched and you sit back, satisfied knowing that you've been part of a historic job well done.

And then the astronomers' union boss calls the lab during the celebration party and "plutos" your proud planetary probe.

"Arrrrrrrrggggggghhhhhhh!"
 The union guys say Pluto is a "dwarf planet" because, while it orbits the sun and has sufficient gravity, it fails on No. 3, suddenly deciding that it's not pushy enough. Technically speaking — something they are very good at: "It must have cleared the neighborhood around its orbit."

What — was it supposed to hire a space bulldozer to knock out Neptune? I say Pluto's a planet, and the IAU is Goofy.

Alan Stern, principal investigator with "New Horizons," told Space.com that "the definition stinks," pointing out that only 400 or so of the world's 10,000 professional astronomers actually voted on the anti-Pluto proposal. (The rest were busy rehearsing a big dance number for a new off off Broadway show "Plutomania!")

I mean, who are these guys anyway? Sounds like the same outfit that surfaces every year around Christmas, offering to name a star after your favorite special someone, so long as you send them \$50 first.

There are online petitions urging the IAU to reconsider (pleasesavepluto.org and plutopetition.com.) And some members of the California state assembly are said to have introduced a half-serious resolution — most California resolutions are, in fact, half-serious — denouncing the IAU for "scientific heresy," which I believe is punishable by burning at the stake, using a Bunsen burner.

So c'mon, IAU. Give Pluto a break. Give my nice brother-in-law, Tim, a break.

But if you still really feel the need to boot out a planet, IAU...how 'bout we kick Uranus all the way to the next solar system!

Mr. Sulu! Take us out of orbit.

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OFFBEAT

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