

A Second Moon

by James Lynn Smith

It had been an ordinary week, until one morning when something both perplexing and alarming occurred. I didn't notice at first, but as I backed out onto the street and began my commute to work, a casual glance revealed it. In the west, the moons appeared as familiar and undramatic as ever—until it hit me. *Two moons. What?*

Two almost identical orbs, side-by-side, looked down placidly from a pale blue sky. *Surely I'm still dreaming.* I turned on the radio and scanned through the broadcast bands. There was nothing exceptional. After turning it off, I studied oncoming drivers. Traffic was congested, as usual, and few seemed to notice anything different. I began to doubt my sanity, pulled to the side of the road, and opened my door. After standing and facing the west, I saw they were still there. Two moons. It was too early to call work and see if anyone there noticed it. I would have to wait until reaching the company or else call my wife and ask her to go outside and look. After calling home and getting a busy signal, I figured one of Clara's longwinded friends was on the line.

By the time I reached the parking lot at the office, a few people in a group were gesturing and pointing at the sky. I was not crazy, or else others were too. Pulling into my designated slot, I took out my lunch and walked toward them.

"Jonas," one of them called to me, "what the hell do you think is going on?"

"If you guys don't know, you're not going to get wiser by asking me." After learning that no ideas or information were forthcoming among the onlookers, I went into the office building. Listening carefully to chatter between workers and

those on the phone, I surmised that several people inside had also seen the second moon.

We worked for a government contractor. Undoubtedly, word would soon come down to us about the strange event. Our company manager, Mr. Stevens, placed his phone down and motioned for a huddle. We all crowded around him. “Government officials here are as surprised as we are. Apparently this happened overnight. Any wild speculations from you guys?”

“Goofy thought, but what if it is some kind of hot air balloon?” one man said.

“But it didn’t change its relative position as I drove in,” a female voice countered.

A third voice asked, “Could it have wandered in from some other place in the solar system and become caught in the Earth’s gravity?”

“If so, astronomers would have seen it coming for months,” I said.

Needless to say, the day was not effective for routine tasks. The manager called a meeting that afternoon, and the upshot was that our government was clueless, but busy trying to dispel panic among the masses. When I left work, I tuned the radio to my favorite news station. All I heard was official assurances that the government was investigating the anomaly and expected to have answers soon. Rubbish, I thought. Tuning in talk-radio stations one after another, various callers and experts were interviewed, proving to be much more imaginative, but offering no concrete answers.

“It’s prob’ly a giant space station that’s come in from Venus,” one caller said.

“We’re investigating the prospects of an atmospheric phenomenon,” said a technical expert. “Material birefringence causes a beam of light to split into two different paths, duplicating an image from only one object.”

Asked to comment on that opinion, another pundit said, “Birefringence implies polarization. It’s existence is easily refuted by rotating a polarized filter over the eye while looking at the moons. There is no evidence of appreciable polarization. It’s two distinct objects.”

A slight touch of the tuner and a religious broadcast presented a plaintive voice saying, “It’s the sins of mankind, brothers and sisters. The sign now in the sky is the harbinger of Armageddon. All must repent and get right with God.”

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When I arrived home, my wife met me at the door. Lines across her forehead indicated concern. “I’m sure everybody knows by now. Any idea of how this is happening?”

“None. It boggles the mind of the best. On the positive side, there’s no apparent danger so far.” My confidence was a bit exaggerated, but I didn’t know what else to say.

“Do you think we should keep Michele home from school tomorrow?”

“We don’t know where the safest place is. If Earth is to be destroyed, then no place is safe.” I bit my tongue too late and tried to backtrack. “Let’s just stay calm, that’s an alarmist speculation, nothing solid.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just wish we had some answers. It’s hard to know what to do.” A gentle smile came over her pretty face. “I guess we should just go on as usual ‘til we know more.”

That’s what we did. I made a salad, poured our beverage, and called Michele in while Clara finished the entree. As we quietly ate, a feeling of normalcy gradually came over me. Surely, the phenomenon of an extra moon would be explained by the next morning. My thoughts eased from alarm to intense curiosity.

Michele snickered. “At school, we’re studying cell division. Maybe the moon is a giant cell and it reproduced itself.”

I nodded. "Right now, your idea is as good as any."

"I'm going to take a sleeping pill tonight," Clara said. "I don't want to wake worried after I drift off."

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Rest didn't come easily for me that night. The next morning I arose, went out the front door, and looked toward the western sky. Two nearly full moons shed silvery light. The sky was beginning to brighten around them, gradating to an intense, rosy red at the eastern sunrise. I had to know more, feeling some change taking place that was more important than anything we had ever experienced. Upon coming back inside, Clara met me in the hallway, tying the belt on her soft robe. She usually sleeps later. "You're up early," I said.

She merely put her arms around me and nestled her forehead between my left shoulder and neck. "I feel we should take advantage of our time, Jonas. We're hardly aware of the routine things we do. We should appreciate things more and feel deeply."

I felt the same sentiment, but wouldn't have known how to express it as well.

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Weeks passed and the news carried numerous programs on science, religion, and politics, most concerning implications of the second moon. The one consistent thing was the inconsistency of every theory. Astronomers verified the orbit, velocity, implied mass, and laser derived distance, but were unable to account for the lack of change in the tides. Theories of alternate universes overlapping and the intersection of different dimensions fell apart because it implied a lack of understandable cause and effect. Religious leaders attempted to explain the second moon in terms of their scriptures, but were unable. Ecumenical efforts increased as the world's faiths joined in the search for an answer. Political suspicions between

countries continued, but curtailed markedly with concern that the unexplainable phenomenon might imply a coming disaster. The news began reporting agreements for worldwide cooperation at the United Nations. Perpetual states of war in the Middle East declined as dealing with the inexplicable loomed in importance.

Months later, faith in the certainty of many human solutions became questionable. Even belief in the *ability* to find true answers grew doubtful. Without certainty, more people became tolerant of other opinions and less demanding that their own answers were sacrosanct. Uncertainty was painful and finding trustworthy answers became more important than maintaining differences.

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Clara and I had our own speculations. One Saturday morning, she sat across the breakfast table from me and seemed eager to say something, first looking at me, then shaking her head as though dismissing it. Her alert, brown eyes had a twinkle, as if new ideas were flashing before her.

“What is it?” I asked. “You want to talk about something?”

“I was just thinking—don’t get concerned—but what if...”

“Say it. You have my attention.”

“What if the second moon is not supposed to be explainable? What if miracles really exist?”

I rubbed my chin. “Miracles? If so, what would be the purpose?”

“Maybe miracles don’t need a purpose. The universe we call orderly and understandable may be an exception among all universes.”

“That would upset some cosmologists who think they know how it all came about. But it’s really not as clear as they pretend. The concepts of dark matter and dark energy are mostly names for what is not understood. So go on.”

“Its purpose might be to shake up our understanding of what it is to be human. Nations think they know and understand who their enemies and friends

are. A religious extremist is certain his purpose is to convert or destroy those who don't think like he does. Some think different cultures can't live together because hate will always reign supreme. Fear of that belief, itself, can spawn hate. Maybe that second moon is there to keep us from getting arrogant about how much we understand. The papers report foundations, races, religions, states and others having global meetings that are actually accomplishing something."

I couldn't find a good response. The hopefulness in her eyes overpowered any caution I might voice to her speculation.

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One week later I backed my car out for my daily commute. Two moons having become commonplace, I gave only a casual glance at the sky. And then a double take. There was only *one* moon in the sky. I turned on the radio but no programming regarding it was available yet. I felt the chatter at work would only be a repeat of that when the extra moon appeared. I had lost both confidence and interest in speculative explanations about its absence or presence.

That afternoon, driving back from work, I discovered that the news had picked up the strange disappearance of the enigmatic orb in the sky. I turned the radio off.

What if Clara were right in her ideas? What would happen next? Would improved global and local relationships retreat to previous levels? Perhaps not. Maybe miraculous events had occurred in history many times, ever giving a slight positive boost to human development.

How will people record this in history books? Will it retreat to the realm of religious myth? Pundits have searched for proof of the Christmas star that led magi from the East to Bethlehem. Astronomers hypothesized comets and alignment of the planets, but nothing was universally accepted. Will this be the same? Maybe the star was a similar miracle, not subject to natural law, thus inexplicable.

That was a lot for this modern-day commuter to accept while driving home from a government contractor's workplace. Thoughts about the two moons would have to be an exception to cause-and-effect thinking. It would be a wonder, a fantastic occurrence, evidence of providence, or perhaps a divine intelligence at work in the universe. If ever logical, deterministic reasoning dictated a negative future in our life, it would be a relief to feel that an unexplainable wonder could yet happen.

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