

A MEETING OF TWO WORLDS

by Gordon E. Abbo

1.

The alarm went off at 4:00 AM. George Abooli hauled his thirty-nine-year-old body out of bed and pulled on his jeans and winter coat, then stuffed his feet into his cowboy boots. With a pair of binoculars hanging from his neck, he staggered out to the back yard, grabbing his camcorder, Nikon digital, and tripods off the kitchen counter on the way. He fumbled with the equipment, his fingers numbed by the chill of the early January night air in Albuquerque. Putting his gloves on, he settled into a rickety lawn chair to watch the peak of the Quadrantid meteor shower during the predawn hours, with the camcorder running and digital camera set for long exposure.

Several times a year George would sit through the same early morning vigil, waiting for the ephemeral shooting stars that could pop up once or twice per minute anywhere within the expanse of the nighttime sky.

But tonight, as his eyelids drooped, he wondered why he bothered. Did he still have the burning curiosity—about celestial phenomena and whether life existed on other planets—of that seven-year-old boy taken by his parents to the Sunday afternoon stargazing programs at the planetarium? Or had his curiosity been overtaken by skepticism drilled into him by his astronomer colleague at the University of New Mexico?

George's musing was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a brilliant green incandescent light. He turned his head to view it directly, watching it drift across the sky like the light from a helicopter...but the sound of a chopper was absent. Alarmed by its seeming closeness and intrigued by its unusual nature, he trained his binoculars on the object, which disappeared before he could get a close-up view. He then leapt up to check his camcorder, and was excited to find out that the event had been recorded.

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After downloading the photos and video onto his laptop, George sat at his kitchen table and poured a third cup of coffee. Then he re-ran the video recording for the tenth time. He pondered the possibilities. On the deepest level, he wanted to believe that the green light was an alien spaceship, operated by intelligent beings from an Earth-like planet in a distant star system. But his rational mind argued otherwise. His astronomer colleague, Rutherford Steinholtz, had insisted that UFO's were explainable scientifically as optical illusions or natural phenomena. George never could convince the professor that UFO's might be of alien origin. He had to admit to himself that the light was most likely a huge meteor or fireball...yet there was something peculiar about it.

The debate inside his head was interrupted by the phone ringing.

"Hello?"

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

"I am awake, Allison. I've been up since four."

"Oh, that's right. How was the meteor shower?"

"I'll show you on my laptop over lunch."

"Great. I have to run a couple of errands this morning, so why don't we just meet at

the Cosmic Café at noon.”

“Okay. See you then.”

* * *

At exactly noon, George walked into his favorite diner. It had stars, planets, and galaxies scrolled across its ceiling. Ambient music drifted from overhead speakers, accenting the theme of outer space. George liked the Cosmic Café more for its atmosphere than for its food. He sat on a hard wooden bench in the waiting area, checking his watch every few seconds, his stomach growling with hunger. He was a medium-sized man with a slender build, black hair, and a neatly-trimmed beard.

After fifteen minutes of waiting impatiently, George saw Allison Bardwell trot through the doorway, her long auburn hair bouncing with each stride.

“Sorry I’m late. My errands took longer than I expected.”

He stood up and gave her a quick embrace. Knowing her tendency to be late, even though it frustrated him, he said, “Allison, no need to explain.”

Before he could say anything further, a hostess came up and said, “Two?” He nodded, grabbed his laptop from the bench, and he and his girlfriend followed her to a booth.

After they placed their orders, George booted up the laptop, and noticed Allison fidget like a child eager to open a Christmas gift. “Let’s see the pictures,” she said.

He adjusted his wire-rim glasses and tapped on the keyboard to bring up a series of photos.

Allison leaned forward to get a better view of the screen and eyed the meteor pictures. “Fantastic! My students will love these. George, you’re a damn good amateur astronomer.”

“Thank you.” He ate up the praise. “Now look at this and tell me if you see something unusual.” He played back the video of the strange green light. “What do you think?”

She looked at it intently...then froze for a moment. “Run it again.”

He hit replay.

“Oh my God,” she said. “A flying saucer!”

“I don’t think so.” George shook his head and declared, “Pattern recognition. It only looks like a flying saucer, but it’s probably a meteor shaped in a way that lends itself to interpretation. Like seeing different shapes in the clouds.”

“But look at how it moves,” Allison pointed out. “Rather slow for a meteor. Note the lack of fragmentation. And there’s not much of a trail. I think it’s an alien spaceship.”

He took a deep breath. “Extremely unlikely.” His rational mind suppressed his innermost hopes.

“But, George, when you consider the vastness of the universe with its billions of galaxies, each one with billions of stars, intelligent life is bound to arise somewhere besides here.”

“I know it’s possible, Allison, but after decades of listening with our radio telescopes and increasing the sensitivity of our means of detection by several orders of magnitude, we have yet to receive a definitive signal from an intelligent alien civilization. The results are discouraging.” He let out a sigh. “I no longer think there’s intelligent life out there.”

“That’s because stodgy old Steinholtz convinced you.”

George frowned. “Maybe, but I’ve also contemplated how humans may have been specially-created and have a unique place in the universe. If aliens existed, that wouldn’t be the case.”

“I’m not trying to second-guess God,” Allison said, “but creating a vast universe with intelligent beings on only one planet seems absurd. Like building a high-rise apartment complex with the intention of having only one unit occupied.”

“Maybe the intention was for the occupants of the one unit to reproduce and move out into the other units.”

Allison paused for a moment while the server delivered their sandwiches, and then responded to George’s last comment in a lowered voice, “Well, I think it’s our destiny to explore outer space and eventually populate the entire galaxy.”

“Provided we don’t destroy ourselves,” George retorted, pointing a finger upward. He took a bite of his Turkey and Swiss. “If we really are alone, it behooves us to do whatever it takes to ensure our future survival and fulfill our destiny.”

Allison chomped on her BLT. “Well, my friend, that’s an interesting debate for you and your students.”

“I remind them we’re most likely alone because of the absence of evidence.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean the evidence of absence,” Allison countered.

“At any rate, humanity doesn’t need to be distracted by the question of extraterrestrial beings. Plenty of problems on Earth need our attention.”

She frowned. “I know. Life’s so stressful these days.”

“Exactly, Allison. Pressing issues, more important than worrying about aliens. I’m concerned about our future survival and the need to find ways to ensure it.”

Her frown turned into a smile. “You’re always writing letters to the editor and opinion articles. You should consider becoming a political activist or running for office.”

“Never.” George set his fork down a bit too hard and furrowed his eyebrows. “I want nothing to do with politics. Politicians are corrupt. I’ll stick to formulating ideas and let my students use them to bring about change.”

Allison sighed. “But then, the politicians won’t listen.”

“They should all be replaced,” George grumbled. He glanced at his watch. “By the way, we’re supposed to be at Martin’s place in twenty minutes.”

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On the other side of the globe in Iraq, an American troop surge, beefed up by improved Iraqi security forces had reduced sectarian violence. Hope of troop withdrawals had blossomed with the election of a new American president. Attention now focused on the reconstruction of postwar Iraq. Prime Minister Fadwad Dalaki organized a committee to work on a plan and had appointed one of his officials, Ibn Malek Habibi, as chairman.

The committee included officials from the ministries of health, education, trade and housing. They met in a drab conference room with little decoration and heavy security far from the Parliament Building since all governmental structures had been targeted by suicide bomber attacks. Risking his life on a daily basis as one of the officials involved in improving Iraqi security, Habibi knew better than to become complacent just because insurgency had decreased.

He stood at the head of a long table, an imposing six-foot-two man in his forties with a shaved head and a trimmed black beard. He was flanked by his assistant, Salidi al-Bakr, a tall slender man also in his forties with short black hair and a mustache. The stiffened sleeves and collars of their white dishdashas gave them a formal appearance.

The other committee members silenced their noisy conversation at the first sound of Habibi's authoritative and resonant baritone voice.

"Let's start the meeting," he said while taking his seat. "As you're all aware, the situation in our war-torn country is grave. One quarter of the population is unemployed, four million people have been displaced from their homes, there is food rationing, and Baghdad gets less than twelve hours of electricity a day. While violence from insurgency is down, violence from crime is up.

"Well," Habibi continued, "we're going to do something about that. The prime minister has organized this committee to determine critical needs for reconstruction and report our findings. Then we will develop proposals. But I say rather than just talk about it, we must see firsthand what's going on. Therefore, we're going to visit a few places in Baghdad and throughout the country. If we work together, we will rebuild this nation." Thrusting his fist into the air he shouted, "And make it greater than ever before!"

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Martin Pankin, George's best friend, answered his doorbell, welcoming George and Allison into his home.

"Come in," he said. "Take your shoes off. Relax a while."

"Heaven knows we need to relax with all the stress in today's world," George remarked.

Martin placed his arm on George's shoulder. "I've got just the thing—my own Jamaican Rum Punch."

Bob Marley's Jamming played on the stereo as Martin and his wife Terri brought their guests their drinks. George and Allison exchanged smiles as they looked at the two of them—Martin with his knotty dreads and dark half-American, half-Jamaican good looks contrasting with Terri's wisps of short blonde hair and her southern belle beauty.

George took a sip. "This hits the spot."

"Well," Terri said in her southern drawl, "I see a silver lining to what's upsettin' y'all. Gas prices are down from four dollars a gallon since last summer; the war in Iraq is quieting down; and we're gettin' a new president who might turn things around."

"Yah mon," Martin said. "That's my wife, the optimist. And me, the pessimist. We still have a shitty economy with a continued epidemic of job cuts and mortgage foreclosures."

George nodded. "The key to reviving the economy is to break the vicious cycle of job cuts, which lead to decreased consumer spending, followed by decreased business, and more layoffs. We have to create millions of new jobs. Also, we must put an end to absurdities such as multi-million dollar bonuses for executives of corporations that perform poorly and eliminate thousands of jobs, and school administrators who get pay raises in the face of budget cuts and teacher layoffs."

"Amen," Martin said, raising both hands.

Just then, the phone in the kitchen rang. Martin ran off to answer it.

Seconds later, he rushed back to the living room, grabbed a remote control and said, “My cousin Charles says there’s something we can’t miss on TV.” Martin tuned in to CNN in the middle of a news report:

“...the object appeared to streak across the sky like a meteor, except that it didn’t travel in a straight line and suddenly made a sharp ninety-degree turn. An unknown number of people in the Denver area reported seeing this mysterious object, described as a silvery disk. Some witnesses believed it was an alien spacecraft, but scientists stated that this sighting was merely an optical illusion...”

“Me think it was an alien spacecraft,” Martin commented.

“I doubt it,” Terri said. “The people reporting the UFO are motivated by wishful thinking.”

“However,” Allison interjected, “George and I analyzed a video recording of a strange green light last night during the meteor shower. I think it might be connected with this sighting. It could very well be an alien ship.”

George shook his head. “Nah. I agree with Terri.” *But what if it really is ET?*

* * *

Two weeks later, George’s telephone rang shortly after he got home from work. He picked up the receiver from its cradle.

“Hello?”

“I need to talk to you,” Allison said, distressed.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“More budget cuts at my school. This time it’s more than just a lack of equipment for my science labs. I just found out that I’ve—” She choked as she forced the words out. “I’ve been laid off.”

“I’m so sorry, Allison. I’m so sorry... Well, guess what? The university’s been hit hard, too. The philosophy department has to eliminate six courses from the curriculum and two assistant professors have to go... I’m one of them.”

“Oh, George. What are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure. We need to plan some kind of strategy. Why don’t you come over and we’ll brainstorm? I’ll fix dinner.”

“That would be sweet.”

George prepared something simple—rice and beans, and a salad—while Allison was on her way. After she arrived at his place, they sat down to dinner and discussed their predicament.

“I’m worried,” Allison said. “I have a mortgage, a car payment, and a credit card debt of nearly five thousand dollars. I’ll have to foreclose on my home because I won’t be able to sell it without taking a big loss. My car will get repossessed. Then there’s my credit card debt. Furthermore, I’ll lose my health insurance. I can’t afford to get sick. I’ll end up on the streets joining the ranks of the homeless.”

“No need to catastrophize,” George said, touching Allison on her forearm. “Don’t worry. If you lose your house, you can stay with me for as long as you need.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We’ll get through this together.”

Allison felt consoled by George’s reassuring words. “Thank you for being there for

me.”

“You’re welcome...Now I ask myself, why?” George held his hand up with the index finger almost touching his thumb. “I was this close to getting tenure, and my job would have been safe.”

“Oh, George. What a shame.”

“Let’s try to figure this out. If we adopt a penurious lifestyle we can make our final paychecks last for months. That will give us time to find another job.”

“Think you’ll be able to find one as a philosophy assistant professor? Good luck.”

“I know it’s a long shot, but I have to try.”

Allison hung her head as she said, “I have to try, too, but good jobs are so scarce. If a position opens up there will be hordes of people applying for it.” Then she looked back up.

George mused, “It’s funny how our lives can be changed by the recession. You get into a mode of thinking where your only concern is physical survival, and it’s difficult to focus on anything else—Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. I never thought it could happen to us. This would be a good time to be a stoic, and just take life as it comes.”

“Not for me. I could never just grin and bear it.”

George gazed into Allison’s enticing green eyes and held both of her hands. “Considering our present circumstances and considering that we’ve been seeing one another for nearly a year, uh, would you like to move in with me? It would certainly be the pragmatic thing to do.”

Allison smiled. “Yes, I would.” She leaned over the table and gave him a kiss. “First thing tomorrow, I’m putting my house up for sale. I’ll be lucky to sell it at a reduced price, but I have to unload it or foreclose.”

“Another long shot.” George hoped she was happy about moving in because she genuinely wanted to live with him and not just because she was relieved to know she’d have a place to stay.

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Over the next six months, George and Allison lived frugally to extend what money they had for as long as possible. Their meager savings were exhausted so they began to dip into their retirement accounts. She didn’t have any luck selling or renting her home and had to foreclose. Both searched the internet and the newspapers daily for job openings in their respective fields, but the pickings were slim.

After three more months, Allison got lucky and landed a part-time temporary job as a substitute teacher at a different high school. Meanwhile, George’s perseverance paid off. He found an opening for an assistant professor of philosophy at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. He’d seized the opportunity and managed to schedule an interview.

George and his girlfriend ate dinner before he had to head out to Las Cruces for his appointment scheduled for tomorrow morning. That meant an overnight stay in a hotel there. While sitting at the table, they watched an anchorman on a TV news channel:

“More strange objects in the sky. Are we being visited by aliens? We’ll have the latest in the recent rash of UFO sightings coming up next.”

“Hmm,” George muttered. “I wonder why the optical illusions are recurring.”

“Maybe ET is back,” Allison said.

He frowned. “Don’t be so sure.”

After the commercial break, the reporter continued:

“Breaking news! A UFO was sighted over western Texas near Abilene just moments ago. A flood of people reported seeing it hover, then maneuver in a way unlike any known aircraft, and finally disappear. A blip on radar screens at Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene sent fighter jets scrambling. But once airborne, they found nothing and returned to base.”

The reporter paused for a moment. “This just in. Air Force officials are dismissing the radar blip as either an equipment malfunction or space debris.”

“As usual,” George muttered as he flicked the TV off with his remote control, “no hard evidence for alien spaceships.”

“Regardless, I can’t dismiss it,” Allison countered. “Your video and all the UFO sightings tell me something’s going on.”

“Don’t be so gullible. As a science teacher, you should know better than to blindly accept such claims.”

Allison folded her hands across her chest and flared her nostrils. “You know something? You’re a condescending pompous ass.”

George was stunned by her remark.

She continued her rant. “You’re also stubborn.”

“What do you mean, stubborn?” Anger welled up in him.

“I mean closed-minded and rigid,” Allison said, raising her voice. “You have to have everything in a certain place, do things in a certain way. Your daily rituals get on my nerves.”

“What’s wrong with being organized? It’s better than being the slob that you are.”

“How dare you call me a slob.”

George saw the anger intensifying in her eyes, but he shot back before she responded, “Face it. You’re not organized like I am.”

“Shut up, George. You disgust me.”

“I don’t have to take this. I’m getting on the road.”

“Go. Go to your stupid interview.”

“Goodbye.” George grabbed his suitcase and stormed out, slamming the front door behind him.

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Mile marker 198 along the shoulder of the road sprung into view in the car’s headlights and whizzed by as George, ruminating about the fight with his girlfriend, drove south on I-25. He glanced at the car’s digital clock—8:04 PM. Less than two hundred miles to Las Cruces. He estimated he should reach his hotel before eleven thirty and get to bed by midnight. That would give him ample time to sleep before his interview at ten.

George continued down the road, rehashing the argument in his mind, wondering what had gone wrong. He conjectured that their frustration level over going through hard times had reached the breaking point, and as Allison vented her pent-up anger, she noticed his faults more. Was he really condescending and pompous? He didn’t think so,

but for a moment he wondered if sometimes he did get that way.

Away from the glare of city lights, George noticed a star-filled sky through the windshield. One of the stars straight ahead suddenly became bright green and started moving toward the south-southwest. He didn't think much of it. *Just an airplane.*

He passed mile marker 183. The star had grown brighter and continued moving in the same direction, although somewhat erratically. Then it slowed down.

That plane's not moving very fast. Maybe it's a helicopter.

Mile marker 179. The star was brilliant now. George seemed to be gaining on it. *Doesn't look like a helicopter or plane.*

Mile marker 178. The light started to veer west, picking up speed and moving away from the interstate. George was curious about it, but he had to get to his hotel and go to the interview tomorrow morning. He didn't want to waste his time chasing down an illusion...What if it wasn't an illusion? What if it was a spaceship? It couldn't be. Or could it? If he didn't investigate, he'd never know, but he didn't have time.

Mile marker 177. George kept glancing at the light as it pulled away. *What the hell?* His curiosity got the best of him and he had to find out what it was. He decided he'd better get off at the next exit so he could follow it, figuring he could afford to take a little bit of time and still get to Las Cruces around midnight.

He slammed on the accelerator and raced to Exit 175, where he turned off onto Old Highway 85 and headed southwest. The light moved to the west-northwest and was getting away from him. He had to find another side road. A mile and a half further, George got lucky and made a right turn onto graveled County Road 12. He chased the light, now discernable as a disk, and sped toward Ladron Peak. The mysterious object decelerated and floated downward, disappearing behind a hill near the foot of the mountain. As it did, the light faded from view.

Oh, no. I've lost it. But he had to keep going and try to find it.

An eerie feeling came over George as he drove down that dark, lonely road through the middle of nowhere, with only the beams of his car's headlights in front of him. He kept glancing off to either side, hoping to find something, but he saw nothing unusual. After a few miles and what seemed like an eternity, he spotted a glowing object hovering just above the ground approximately one hundred yards from the road. He parked his car and looked in amazement, and then opened up his cell phone to dial his girlfriend's number. *I have to tell Allison about this...and apologize.*