Reveling in the quiet majesty of the heavens

It was a cold, cold winter's night in Danville, Va. I was standing outside the office in the darkness, watching the moon disappear, when the phone in my pocket shuddered to life.

It was the lady, calling from 45 miles away, apparently watching the same spectacle. "Tell me what I'm seeing here," she said.

With the imprecise knowledge of the amateur sky watcher, I informed her that the moon was now entering the earth's shadow, and would within the next several hours be totally gone — at least for awhile. I don't know if it was her first lunar eclipse; it probably wasn't. But even in that short phone conversation, looking upward into the night sky, I detected in her voice a sense of genuine wonder.

Fast-forward nearly three years from that night in February 2008. The girl who'd called on the phone was now my wife, and — safely back home in Carolina — once again I was outside shivering in the bitter cold, binoculars aimed skyward, watching as the moon slowly vanished behind its darkened curtain.

Last month's lunar eclipse was overshadowed, understandably, by the snowfall (better than five inches at my house) that arrived four days later. Certainly the snow had a much greater impact on the population at large, providing the area with its first white Christmas in decades; nevertheless, it turns out that a lunar eclipse on the winter solstice is even rarer. Geoff Chester, of the U.S. Naval Observatory, informs us that only one other lunar eclipse in the last 2,000 years occurred on the winter solstice: in 1638, three hundred seventy-two short years ago.

This darkening of the moon attracted its share of attention, from those sky watchers truly determined to see it. In North America things got started impossibly early in the morning hours of Dec. 21; the moon began penetrating the earth's shadow just after 1:30 a.m., with totality (nearly completely obscured) beginning a little more than an hour later.

There are benefits, though, to holding a job where working late and being awake all hours of the night is the norm. Standing in the darkness on the longest night of the year, the clock ticking toward 3 a.m. and the moon growing ever dimmer, I wondered how many others were outside, watching. Certainly I didn't see anyone else out in their driveways, looking skyward; for a few moments it was possible to think I was the last man left in the universe, watching an astronomical phenomenon designed and played out for myself alone.

The heavens have inhabited a central role in the human story pretty much as long as we've had eyes to see. The ancients developed calendars based on the sun and moon; mariners of the Age of Discovery steered their ships by the stars; learned men like Copernicus and Galileo charted the movements of the planets, using acquired knowledge to challenge the things we thought we knew. Now modern astronomers can

predict, to the minute, when the next eclipse will occur. (June 15, though North America gets left out this time.)

The part of me that wishes he'd studied the sciences a little harder envies this knowledge. And yet I still revel in the quiet majesty and grandeur of these seldom-seem astronomical spectacles, no less eerie for the factual explanations behind them, unveiled when much of the world's sleeping. Working the night side has its drawbacks, it's true. But every once in awhile the universe parts that sable curtain for just a moment, and for those still in the waking world, unveils a gleaming jewel — one whose rarity makes it shine all the clearer.

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