



A Moth on the Moon

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a short story

By Michael Graeme

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We had not been to the moon for such a long time and I was dismissive when I heard rumours of plans for an imminent return. The first inkling I had that it might actually be true was when they dragged the shuttle Saint Louis across to Hangar 12, saying she was in for a refit.

Now for those of you who don't know, the Saint Lou is one of our more modern ships and I've served as ground crew on most of the missions she's ever flown. I wasn't surprised then, when my old mentor Stavros said he'd been appointed Mission Controller to a special project, that Saint Lou was our bird, and he wanted me on the team.

It sounded like a military project - a spy-satellite, or a plasma weapon trial, the usual sort of thing. Security was tight, nothing leaking out before the first mission briefing, which was rare. Then the briefing itself proved to be an unusually intimate affair, a handful of the key technical guys: me on navigation, others on life support, thrusters and ground control. We were a fairly relaxed bunch having worked together many times on routine orbital work and we thought we'd seen everything.

They had Saint Lou's captain there as well, Fran and her second officer Jan. I'd flown with them more times than I could recall, at least through the interface of my ground bound Virtuality suite, and I knew these were a couple of ice-cool girls. Well into their thirties now, they oozed confidence and experience. Like a lot of guys on the team, I was sweet on both of them. This was kind of confusing because we were all pretty young, and they seemed nearly old enough to be our mothers by now - so we mostly kept quiet about it.

Anyway, the briefing began when Stavros came and locked the door behind him. Then the first slide went up. There was a schematic of Saint Lou, her cargo bay half full of thruster modules, the biggest we had at the time and all folded up like one of those little block puzzles. The other half of the bay was taken up with the biggest in-flight LOX tank I've ever seen. So, we were going to the moon and we were going in the best ship we had. We'd fixed her up with extra fuel and a thruster array, which Jan and Fran and a couple of Space-grunts were going to bolt on in lunar

orbit. Then, Saint Lou would be piloted down to the surface and the whole lot brought back home, maybe,...

It was feasible of course. They'd managed it in the sixties, at a time when they hadn't even the technology for a quartz watch, so we could certainly manage it now. But why bother? We'd already planted the flag, staked our place in history. And we simply didn't do things like that any more.

Stavros put up his next slide. It was an aerial view of the lunar terrain, typical stuff - rocks, mountains and pockmarked plains.

"Okay," said Stavros, "Nothing unusual, eh? That's what we thought, until we started getting back these high-resolution images from the lunar mapping probe."

The next slide homed in on a mountain range. It was an image from the L.M.P. and the caption along the bottom read "Classified".

"Take a look around here," he said, pointing out a major peak with his laser stick. "No? Then how about this one. Resolution's down to around half a meter."

I could see something now, a splash of colour amid the usual blandness but it was the last slide that clinched it, the impeccable German optics of the L.M.P. resolving pebbles only a few centimetres across. It had to be a joke though. There was no mistaking the shape of a flag laid out flat on the ground: red white and blue - not the Stars and Stripes but the British Union Jack. There was laughter all round and hoots of derision, but Stavros rode it out with an eerie calm that finally simmered us down into an uneasy silence.

"So what have the Brits said?" I asked.

"We ain't spoken to them," replied Stavros, "And they sure as hell don't know that we know."

"But do you really believe the Brits have been to the moon and not told anyone?"

One of the life support guys chipped in: "There was that space-plane they were looking at in the eighties,..."

"That was just a hypersonic cruiser. It never got off the drawing board," I said. "They can barely afford an air force, let alone put a man on the moon,... and without us knowing about it! Come on, Stavros!"

We chewed it over for an hour. No one was really able to accept it as anything other than an elaborate wind-up, that maybe the Russians had done it with the Lunakhod robot lander. They were the only other guys who'd ever put hardware on the moon,... but the location was all wrong and even so, to run a fragile rover up a mountain and unfurl someone else's flag on the top? What was the point?

But the fact remained: the image was real. The flag was there,... . and we were going to take a look.

It was December 12 when I sat in the Virtuality Suite at Mission Control. I was ground navigator so I was now in the centre seat, the vast wrap-round screen showing real time images of the lunar scape being transmitted from the cameras on Fran's helmet. I had on a pair of 3D goggles and the effect was stunning. I was inside her head, so to speak, looking at what she was looking at. When she turned, I turned, when she paused, I paused. She and I were as one and, though, as usual, I never dared say anything, I kind of liked it.

Saint Lou was propped up on her tail like a comic book rocket ship and I could see a trail of boot prints as Fran looked back, waiting for Jan and the two grunts to catch up.

"You getting this Houston?" Beep.

"Affirmative, Moonwalker," Beep.

Fran turned to face a vast area of plain, at the foot of the mountain. It was a grim, pale, dusty looking monstrosity. Rather than me, I thought, but Fran was more interested in the tracks in the foreground. There were three long parallel gouges. The middle one was thin and snaky, fifty meters wide, fifty deep. The outer ones were deeper, broader, running off into the distance. There were boot prints too, a lot of them - and they weren't ours. They appeared, smaller than a normal space-boot,... almost like the mark you'd make with a regular hiking boot.

"Still getting this, Houston?" Beep.

"Affirmative, Moonwalker" Beep. "Jeeze." Beep.

"What was that Houston?" Beep.

"Er... nothing, Moonwalker. Proceed when ready." Beep.

They roped up, took a datum fix on Saint Lou, which I copied onto my chart and then they set off - a long, slow ascent.

"Footprints seem to be leading up the hill, Houston. Reckon we'll just follow." Beep.

"Affirmative, Moonwalker. Direction checks out." Beep.

The trail steepened, a nightmare of rock, Fran leading the way, carrying me with her. Back on earth a climb like that would have taken days, but in low gee bounding up the contours and avoiding the nastier crags, they made it in a couple of hours, during which time the Virtuality Suite had begun to fill up. All the while, I had Stavros, breathing anxiously over my shoulder. Then there were the other tech-heads peering intently at their monitors and, by now, some politicians had drifted in, conspicuous in their suits.

"Houston, this is Moonwalker. Gimme an ETA." Beep.

Fran sounded tired. The medical girls were off to my left, and I could see they were looking worried as they checked heart rates and stuff. Even in low gee this was an excruciating climb - and a slip might mean a burst suit and a dead astronaut.

"ETA. Five minutes, Moonwalker." Beep.

I was there when she made the summit, when she cleared the last ring of crags and followed the boot prints to where the flag lay stretched flat and neatly framed with carefully placed rocks.

"It's the Union Jack all right, Houston. You getting this?" Beep.

"Getting it, Moonwalker." Beep. "What's that off to your right?" Beep.

"My right?" Beep. "Oh. Gotcha, Houston." Beep. "It's a pile of stones, like a small structure." Beep. "Hang on, there's something here." Beep.

It was a neatly formed pyramid of stones, glaringly unnatural, about a metre high, and set into it was a crudely fashioned door made of wood. I saw Fran's bulky glove fumbling with it.

"There's something in here, Houston." Beep.

Nestling inside a small cavity behind the door was a bright orange container. "Okay, Houston. I got it." Beep. "Houston,... it's metallic. It says Jacobs on the lid." Beep. "What the,... " Beep? "I'm going to open it up now." Beep.

"Careful Moonwalker,... " Beep.

Struggling in her bulky space gloves, Fran eventually opened the lid. Inside was a folded copy of The Times, a blundering great revolver, a busted pocket watch and a hard-backed notebook, which Fran described

as some kind of journal. The Times was dated June 18, 1947. There was also a piece of paper, on which someone had written, in precise copper plate:

"To whom it may concern. I, Arnold Copeland-Cooper, being a serving member of the Royal Air Force, do hereby claim this mountain and all the land visible here-from in the name of His Majesty George the Seventh, King of England, Sovereign ruler of Great Britain and the British Empire."

June 27, 1947

There followed a stunned silence and then I heard one of the politicians say that it would never stand up in court - I think he'd rather missed the point. "I gotta consult over this," he said to Stavros. "Don't anybody move, up there or down here. Not till I get back. Understood?"

Stavros called over to life support. "How much oxygen they got?"

"Five hours."

"Navigation. How long back to Saint Lou?"

"Two hours, minimum."

Stavros turned to the politico. "You got thirty minutes. Then we're out of there."

The politico spoke at length outside the door on his cell phone and when he came back he said he wanted the flag removing, and the box bringing home. Fran and the team seemed a little slow taking this on board. Then there was a worrying break in transmission and the next we knew, they were on their way back down. During debrief on the return flight, Fran explained they'd all been very tired. They'd brought the box, sure. That was safe, "But we just kind of forgot about the flag, Houston. Sorry." Beep,...

Within days after touch down, the team was broken up and Fran disappeared from view for a while. The next we knew she'd been grounded, then kicked out for having failed a narcotics test. I didn't believe a word of it. She was thirty five but had the physique and the reactions of an eighteen year old. You didn't maintain that level of fitness and mental acuity by injecting poison into your body. It had the mark of the politico's all over it, and I guessed it was something to do with the business over the flag.

As for the rest of us the brief was simple. We were to forget the whole thing, which was standard procedure on most of the missions I've worked on. The politico's were handling it and that's all we needed to know - again this was standard procedure and even though none of us would have trusted a politico to help us across the road, we were usually happy to go along with things, and just get on with the next mission. On this occasion though, I felt cheated. We'd spent millions looking for an answer, and found none. How the hell had the Brits done it in '47? I would have given anything for a half an hour with the journal of this Arnold-Copeland-Cooper guy but it had disappeared from quarantine with all the other stuff.

Some months later, Fran turned up at my apartment.

"Wanna know a secret?" she said.

I let her in.

She had the journal, or at least a copy of it. She'd scanned it to Saint Lou's comp. during the flight home, encrypted it into the background of some digital pics she'd taken, then e-mailed it to her own machine on earth.

Sometimes the simplest of subterfuges are the most effective.

"So show me," I said.

"Gotta warn you though. They find out you've seen it, you're in as much trouble as I am. You with me on this?"

"I'm with you. But why me? I'm nobody?"

"Nobody? You navigate me to the moon and you tell me you're nobody."

"Flattery doesn't usually work with me, lady. The truth is always governed by the simplest of equations. You're a

Jet-ass, I'm a tech. I worship the ground you walk on, you think I'm a dork."

"Okay, kid. But you're also a navigator, and there's some stuff in here only a dork like you would understand. I gotta know if this thing's real or some sort of hoax. So, shall we go to work?"

The Journal of Arnold Copeland Cooper, June 8, 1947.

To whom it may concern.

I appreciate the discovery of this journal may cause a stir among those travelers who follow me. As I write, I can see the earth, a lonely and rather fragile looking blue-green sphere, rising over the plain below and I can hardly wait to wrap its richness about me once more.

I set out ten days ago from the little grass airstrip outside my home in Durnley-on-Cam. How different the fertile planes of Cambridgeshire are from the barren flats of this eerie place. It was a difficult flight and I own I spent a whole two days catching up on sleep after my arrival before ever setting foot on this mountain.

You may wonder at my motivation for such a reckless escapade and the answer is a simple one. There is but one heroic endeavour left on earth and that is

the conquering of Everest. I suspect this may soon be accomplished, so where else does one look for adventure? Well, I remember reading as a boy that the mountains of the moon would dwarf any of our indigenous peaks and so resolved even from that early age to one day mount an expedition and to bag as many peaks for king and country as I could.

Of course, such an enterprise was beyond my means for many years until I was taught to fly by the Royal Air Force. Just after the war I purchased a Tiger Moth, which enabled me to pursue my growing love of mountaineering as far away as North Africa. To me there was nothing finer than the polite chatter of its engine and the feel of the wind upon my face as we set out on yet another expedition,... and suddenly I realised at last my goal was attainable,...

I was gutted! "You're telling me this guy went to the moon in an open cockpit biplane?"

Fran looked away. "I know. But you saw everything I saw that day. The flag. The mementos. How else do you explain it?"

"I was hoping for something more technical - like maybe the Brits had stumbled across an alien space ship, or that maybe Hitler had been working on something during the war,..."

"Forgive me, kid, but neither of those explanations sound any more plausible."

"Okay, but this is ridiculous. They simply couldn't have done it with the technology they had back then."

"There's a lot of people say that about the landings in the sixties. That it had to have been faked! But we did it just the same. Look, I know it sounds crazy but I'm going to England, to Durnley-on-Cam, to see if anyone remembers this Arnold-Copeland Cooper. So,... do you wanna come along?"

We arrived a week later. It was a sleepy little place, the sort that seems hardly to have changed in centuries, in spite of it being only ten minutes away from the very modern roar of the A1 highway. The first place we checked out was the village store and even though the girl behind the counter looked barely more than nineteen, she told us that she knew Arnold-Copeland-Cooper very well indeed.

"You mean he's still alive?"

"Oh yes," she said. "He's in his eighties now. Lovely old chap. He went to the moon, you know. Wrote a book all about it,... I've got a copy for sale here, if you're interested."

She handed me the book. It was a paperback, self published and titled: "A Moth on the Moon."

"A lot of people who read it think it's fiction," she said. "But it's not. It's true. He really went."

I paid for the book, though I had a feeling I was going to regret it, and then we made our way across to the little thatched cottage where we'd been told we might find the great man himself. We were greeted at the door by a wizened octogenarian. He had a slightly bent frame and a slight limp, but a keen twinkle in his eye. We'd already looked up his war record, so we knew he'd existed and that he'd proved to be both a distinguished pilot and a fearsome warrior, with over twenty kills to his name. He also had to be liar, guilty of one of the tallest tales of modern times.

Fran shook his hand. "Mr Cooper?"

"Ah," he said, as if he had been expecting us. "You'll be wanting a look around as well with you?" He shuffled inside and led us through the house, into an overgrown back garden. At the bottom of the garden was a large shed with double doors which opened onto a field.

"She's in here," he said and then stood to one side so we could get a better view. "She's not been flown for a while - I've had a dicky knee - but I should be able to get her up again soon."

It was a Tiger Moth, bright yellow and obviously well cared for. On her nose was a crescent moon and the numerals 1947.

"I don't understand what all the fuss is about," he said later as he served us tea in the garden. "I've had all sorts of nasty people around recently, turned the house upside down they did, looking for goodness knows what." He shook his head and eased his frame into a wicker chair. "I wouldn't care but it's fifty years ago, now - if I hadn't written that book at the time, I'd be hard pressed to remember any of it."

"Back then they just laughed. A raving loony, that's what they called me. Now they come around saying they want proof. 'Like what?' I say, and they say: "Well rocks and stuff to show I'd been there." I told them I didn't have any. You can't go filling a fragile crate like a Moth with bloody rocks, well can you?"

"Of course you can't," said Fran who seemed quiet taken by the old guy.

"Anyway, I'm sure I left some bits and bobs up there, and a letter too, claiming the whole place for King and Country, that sort of thing, for what it was worth."

"I know," said Fran. "I've been there too. I read your letter."

He smiled. "You've been there too, my dear?"

Fran nodded and Cooper seemed to drift off for a while. "Lovely view from that mountain, don't you think? A little eerie at first, but quite moving."

"Yes. Moving."

"How did you manage it though?" I said, struggling to hide my sceptical tone. "I mean, how did you coax such a fragile crate all that way?"

He seemed to respond to my interest. "Lovely aircraft, a moth - ever been in one? It wasn't so difficult - I mean technically. It was the length of the trip that proved to be the most difficult, cramped up like that for days on end. Take off was uneventful, dark of course, followed the Cam for a while, then I pulled back on the stick, yanked the throttle wide open and off we bloody-well went."

"You said we?"

"I went with Archie,... he's in the book - you should read it. Silly bugger almost didn't make it back - pranged his kite in some bloody great pothole. Brand new Moth it was,... beautiful thing. Broke our hearts to leave it behind,..."

"You mean it's still up there? A De Havilland Moth,... on the moon?"

"Yes, didn't I say? Look, there's no chance you Yanks could salvage it for us is there? I wrote a letter asking about it back in the sixties when I heard you were going. I didn't get a reply. Too much trouble I suppose. Still, it would be nice to have the old girl back one day, if only for Archie's sake - he'd be absolutely delighted!"

Fran leaned over and placed her hand on his arm "I don't have much influence these days," she said. "But I'll see what we can do."

She looked at me, as if expecting me to back her up, but I couldn't believe we were wasting our time even talking to this old guy. It was all too much - too many unanswerable questions, like how do you fly an aeroplane to the moon when there's no air? How do you come back without so much as scorching your paint-work on re-entry? It was a hoax. They simply hadn't the technology in the 40's and it seemed incredible to me that someone of Fran's intelligence could believe for a moment that any of it might be true.

We left just before dark, Cooper waving us off from his gate as if we were his long lost grandchildren. "Come back any time," he said, though the invitation probably applied more to Fran than to me.

Fran drove, steering a slow, meandering course across the fens, aiming for the A1. She read my thoughts "Look, I know," she said. "I feel the same. But it's easier to dismiss something like this out of hand, regardless of the evidence, than it is to sit down and piece together how it might have been done."

"I'd rather not think about it at all - we've wasted enough time."

"Maybe not. Look, all the L.M.P. data's on the Internet these days, right?"

"Sure, but they've touched out the anomalies around Cooper's mountain. There's no trace of the flag you left behind, no blast marks from the Saint-Lou. No one knows. None of it ever happened."

"Oh really? You heard the man. There's still a Tiger Moth still up there."

"According to him. But the guy's crazy. And even if it was up there, they will have touched it out by now."

"Maybe not. It depends on what you expect to see, doesn't it? Maybe they just missed it, because, like you, a part of them will simply refuse to believe it can possibly be there." She tossed a road atlas onto my lap. "Plot me a course for the nearest town, nav-boy."

"Town?"

"We need an Internet-cafe, and lots of coffee."

It seemed, if there really was a moth on the moon, then we were going to find it

From the same author on Feedbooks

Love is a Perfect Place (1999)

A short story by Michael Graeme - a twenty minute read: He scooped some water up and drank. It astonished him. It tasted like he imagined the most perfect water should taste, but it was a sensation spoiled by the queer fact that he wasn't thirsty even though he had walked for hours under a hot sun.

"Perhaps we don't need food,... or water," he said. "Only when it pleases us."

He looked around then at the land and he felt a chill. What manner of place was this? And what manner of being had he become?

The Enigma that was Carla Sinclair (2004)

A short story by Michael Graeme (a 45 minute read):

I was not completely unhinged. She was just a computer program, a crude simulation - at best a never ending animated cartoon with only one character and no story line. But she was "something",... a hobby I suppose you might say. Other young men had hobbies, equally obscure, though perhaps more socially inclusive. They collected camera gear, they went fishing, raced cars or drank themselves stupid. Me? I coded in my bedroom. Same thing? Well, not quite. You see, while other people's hobbies took them out of themselves, mine enabled me to climb deeper inside.

Lively Custard (2004)

Short Story - a 25 minute read: Rogue trees are popping up all over the little town of Frinton-cum-Hardy and the residents have begun speaking in metaphors so mixed and mangled, poor Armitage, connoisseur of all things bookish, finds he no longer understands his mother tongue. And if all that isn't enough his young protege, Jenny, from the Books Galore Emporium is having "uncle trouble"!

The Choices (2006)

A fifteen minute read:

I am sitting here in the lounge-bar of the McKinley Arms Hotel, by the shores of Loch Lomond, and I am staring out into the twilight at my

choices. I have been this way before many times and I always seem to go wrong at this point, so you must forgive what must seem like fastidious caution, but I simply have to get it right this time!

Escape From Paradise Island (2007)

A 25 minute read by Michael Graeme: Crime doesn't pay. That's what they try to teach you in prison, and fair enough, I might even have left there one day determined to go straight except, suddenly, I was on an island in the China Sea, gazing at a beautiful girl in a yellow Bikini. So maybe it had been worth it after all. But careful now! You had to avoid thinking things like that because they'd a nasty habit of dissolving back into reality and you'd wake up right back in that stinking grey cell: five years of your life already erased, with another two to go, and all because you'd never been able to resist the puzzle of a pretty motor car!

The Man Who Could Not Forget (2008)

A Short Story by Michael Graeme (a fifteen minute read):

...I have a problem with my memory. It isn't that it ever fails me - quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, my recall of events from all but the earliest years of my life is truly photographic, so there was little doubt in my mind the woman before me now was the one who had stolen the book....

The Magician of Monkton Pier (2009)

Short Story - a twenty five minute read.

Joshua is navigating his eco-boat, The Mattie Rat along a dark and stinking stretch of the old canal through Monkton - a city overwhelmed by gangs and gun toting Militias. Joshua's seen it all before: urban decay, corruption and the death of hope. Living on the water, and with no need for money, he's usually able to slip unnoticed through these town stretches and into the green beyond. But when he's tricked into picking up a pair of enigmatic hitchers, Joshua knows there's going to be trouble in Monkton. In spite of his best efforts, the wily old Waterman is about to become an accomplice in the biggest magical stunt of all time. And if the world no longer believes in magic, well, it only has itself to blame.

Crystal Says (2009)

A twenty minute read: So, I'm standing in this crop circle, down in Wiltshire, England, and there's a girl dangling a crystal from the end of a chain. She's very pretty, so I'm thinking I'll have to find a way of overlooking the fact she's probably also some kind of crank if I want to take advantage of the situation here,...

Katie's Rescue (2009)

A thirty minute read: It felt odd, driving into Raworth, because where I come from Raworth does not exist. I know that stretch of road, you see? It dips down to the river Warfe, crosses over by the old bridge, then rises up the dale on the other side. Ordinarily there's just a steep wooded ravine and a picturesque waterfall on the river but, like I said, on this occasion, there was also Raworth,...

The Summer of '83 (2009)

Well, that's middle age for you: you either grow up, grow into it, accept its imperfections, its disappointments, and grow old grumbling at someone, or you ruin yourself on a mad fling with a girl half your age that you know won't last, and then you grow old alone and with only the walls to grumble at.

In the absence of any other alternatives, I know which of the two I prefer, ... but what if there was a third alternative?

The Man Who Talked to Machines (2010)

A short story from web-author Michael Graeme (a half hour read):

"You have to talk to them, counsel them, mesmerise them into stillness before you set foot anywhere near them. And, though I may not be considered wholly sane, at least I have a reputation for the way I talk to machines."



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