

The Man on the Moon

A serial in six parts

1.

Harvey Jennings went to the window and peered into the night, across at the dish, its huge crescent of steel glowing beneath a chunky, shadowed moon. He again paid tribute, as he habitually did, to the planners and engineers who'd built the apparatus, acknowledging the brilliance of its engineering. It was a thing of beauty, the scope. The structure was precise, a lacework of fine steel held in place by huge hydraulic arms, the dish's polished skin glistening in the moonlight, the tri-pedal nose of the central antenna pointing squarely at the spectacular half-orb overhead.

Harvey looked up at the moon, marvelling at its clarity; on that score too, he thought, the planners had got it right. The site was excellent: the atmosphere almost always clear, a prism through which light and sound passed with minimal distortion. That was what was bothering him: if there was nothing out of order with the scope – if the coordinates were correct - where else could the signal have come from?

He walked briskly back around the mezzanine toward the radio scope's control room. Mark Albright, the only other technician on duty, was busy at the optical scope's console on the ground floor. Harvey closed the door to the control room and went over the desk, rolling into the desk chair as he studied the figures displayed on the monitor. The sequence of digits confirmed what he'd expected; the dish was precisely where it ought to be, on the southern extremity of the Sea of Tranquillity.

To Harvey the obvious conclusion didn't make sense: there'd been no lunar expeditions in that area for over ten years, certainly no crewed landings. He stood for a moment staring blankly at the screen, then leaned forward and touched it. The second of two large spools of magnetic tape – the first was already in slow circulation – went through a deft series of rotations then slowly began to turn in harmony with its partner. There was a sharp hiss through the speakers above Harvey's head. After several seconds, the static was cut off abruptly by a male voice, its accent unmistakably northwestern American: "Ah, this is Genesis One. 24243 locked on."

A second voice, again American, responded. "24243 confirmed, Genesis One. Vertice is 2221."

There was a short pause. "2221 confirmed and locked on. We have the target."

"Copy. Status?"

"Ahh... target is mobile, travelling on foot."

“Inventory?”

“RPG’s, looks like six; couple of pack animals, probably supply and munitions.”

“Copy. Set target, copy and lock.”

A brief pause. “Target set, copied and locked.”

“Enact.”

Another brief hiss of static. “Enacted at... 0219.02.”

“Genesis One, this is Genesis Base confirmed.”

“Copy that. Regards to terra firma.”

After that, there was an abrupt wall of white noise. Harvey arrested the audio, got out of his chair and slowly straightened, arching his back. His tall, thin frame threw fractured shadows across the walls as he moved about, thinking things through. He had little doubt about the authenticity of the signal; the scope’s antenna was too finely tuned to pick up vagarious signals from terrestrial or airborne transmitters.

Authenticity was one thing. What troubled him were the implications: the apparent source location the signal, and the question of why the scope had picked up the message at all. The transmission was clearly military, and highly sensitive; such communications, he knew, were always heavily encrypted, and although the radio scope might occasionally intercept the short bursts of ultra-low frequency static that signalled the passage of information from orbiting satellites or high-altitude aircraft, deciphering the scrambled contents was well beyond the capability of the facility’s decoders. He could think of only one explanation: something had gone wrong with the military’s encoders.

The source of the signal was something else.

He wished it had stayed that way. To him, the intercepted signal was more of a inconvenience than anything else: having received it, he’d now have to do something about it. If there was a fault in the Americans’ encryption process, Neil Grimes, the facility’s director, would certainly need to be told. Harvey didn’t relish the prospect: the director had accountabilities that went well beyond the activities of a single scope; he headed the national network of installations, all fourteen of the major scopes, including an interface with Pine Gap. He coordinated all inter-facility activity, including tracking the lunar landings. Grimes would expect to be extensively briefed, and the man’s intolerance of those who failed to provide adequate background in their reports, or who overlooked obvious possibilities, was legendary.

Harvey had no intention of inviting such professional humiliation. He leaned forward and pecked the console again, until a time-lapse exposure of the night's sky slowly layered itself onto the screen. Any moving objects - meteorites, satellites, high-flying aircraft - that entered the scope's catchment that night would appear on the image as white streaks. But no telltale tracers appeared; nothing, apparently, had crossed the precincts of the dish's antenna.

With another couple of taps on the screen, Harvey brought another image – a section of the lunar surface – into view. He manipulated the image until the massive crater of Plinius sat like a watermark in the centre of the screen. A small red dot on the crater's rim identified the current focus of the scope. He zoomed in on the spot, studying it.

He was bent over the console when the door of the control room suddenly opened, and Albright entered, carrying a mug of coffee. Harvey touched the screen again, and the image on it disappeared, replaced with a layered series of digits. Albright wandered over and stood a few paces behind Harvey, gingerly sipping at the edge of the cup as he gazed at the console.

“How's it going?” he asked conversationally.

“Fine.” Harvey replied, without looking up.

“Checking frequencies?”

“Uh-huh.”

Albright grunted. Like Harvey, he understood the laborious business of having to meticulously check every aspect of their work. It went with the almost limitless patience that astronomical research required - always better to check and re-check, rather than miss something that could turn out to be a significant discovery. The checks demanded intense concentration, and it was an unwritten rule of the observatory not to distract anyone doing it. Albright eventually drifted away, slurping his cooling brew.

Harvey eased himself back in his chair, holding his open hand to his forehead and massaging the skin between thumb and forefinger. Occasionally he lifted the hand to run it through his thin sandy hair. It was a habit he'd formed in his youth, longer ago than he could remember. Angela called it his ‘Thinker’ pose.

There was no explanation for the source of the signal but the self-evident: the signal had come from the surface of the moon. It was clearly a military transmission, so somebody – the Americans, he supposed - was operating a military installation up there. It was time to make it Grimes' problem.

He picked up the phone and made the requisite call, wincing at the irritable edge in the director's voice when he eventually picked up the phone. "It's Harvey, sir. I'm sorry to call so late, but you said to let you know if anything ... well, problematic, came up, and I think it just may have." There was a brief pause while Harvey collected his thoughts. "I've picked up a signal, a sensitive one from the sound of it, an American military communication. It seems there's a fault with their encryptors. I thought you needed to know." He hesitated. "If we can pick it up, I guess others can."

Harvey waited while Grimes digested the information. "Are you at the scope?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me hear it."

Harvey patched the message into the conversation and replayed it. When Grimes came back on the line, his voice had a more businesslike quality. "Okay. What's the trajectory on that?"

Harvey hesitated. "Ah... well, that's the thing, sir; there doesn't appear to be one. There's no sign of movement on the grid; the source seemed to be stable."

Grimes grunted. "Could it be something in fixed orbit, something in the antenna's line of fire?"

"Well, that's what I thought, sir, but when I ran a trace on the source position, nothing showed up."

"No other communications in the zone?"

"Nothing." Harvey proffered his conclusion. "Sir, I think the signal's come from the lunar surface."

There was another pause, longer this time. "Okay," Grimes said at last. "Look, I'll need to take this up with Canberra straight away; I'm sure the Minister'll want to let the Americans know sooner rather than later if they're spreading their military communications half-way around the world. I'll ring Crawley, and he can take it up with the Yanks; let them sort it out." He cleared his throat. "In the meantime, just keep the thing to yourself, will you? No need to remind you we're both bound by the Official Secrets Act on this."

"I understand," Harvey said.

“Thanks, Harvey. It might be best if you’d keep the spools under wraps, too; lock them in the safe. Get me a copy of the track – a CD’ll do – and drop it straight around, would you? I’d like to have it on hand when I make the call.”

As soon as he got off the phone, Harvey did as he’d been asked, transferring the captured communication onto a CD. As an afterthought, he slipped another CD into the machine and dubbed a second copy, which he secured in the safe with the spools.

The drive to Grimes’ place gave him time to reflect on the significance of his discovery. Through the windscreen, he could see the brilliant, shadowed moon still ascending, bathing the landscape in harsh silver light. He located the grey ring of Plinius. It made sense, he thought, to locate a base on the crater rim, above the dust. With the doors of conjecture open, Harvey found himself considering other possibilities: if there was one base, there could well be others, a network of installations. As the lights of the town rose into view, a shiver of apprehension ran through Harvey’s lean frame. He thought of Angela and the kids. What impact might such monstrous technology have on their lives; on everyone’s lives, come to that?

Grimes was waiting in his driveway, his thick frame silhouetted against the porch light. He took the CD Harvey handed him. “I’ll take it from here,” he said, glancing at his watch. “You’re due off at six; it’s not far off that now. You might as well head straight home.”

Harvey accepted the release thankfully, and drove quickly across town to his house, killing the lights as he pulled into the bush-lined drive. The moon had ebbed below the horizon, fading before the creeping dawn. He slunk past the rooms of his son and infant daughter, quietly undressed, and was about to slip into bed beside his wife when the phone in the hallway began to burr quietly. The caller was Neil Grimes. He sounded agitated.

“Thought I’d try to catch you before you turned in,” he said. “Look, this transmission business... they want me in Canberra ASAP, tonight. More to it than meets the eye, apparently. I’m leaving now; they’ve organised a charter flight. Sorry to leave you with this at such short notice, but would you mind keeping an eye on things while I’m gone. I was rostered on for a shift tomorrow night. It’ll mean taking a double shift, but you can take it in lieu when I get back. You okay with that?”

“Fine,” Harvey replied. He was privately pleased that Grimes held him in sufficient regard to offer the arrangement.

“I’ll be back as soon as possible. Anything urgent comes up in the meantime, call my mobile.” There was a brief pause. “Thanks for your help on this, Harvey. You’ve handled it well.”

For a day and a half Harvey heard nothing further about the matter. He worked the extra shift without incident, catching up on missed sleep during the day off that followed. Then, not long after he came on duty for his shift the following night, word came through that Grimes had been killed, in a small plane that crashed on its way back from Canberra.

*