

Rain's Agenda  
Jason Shannon

*Maracaibo*

I make my delivery of the racy comics to a private collector on the coast of Gulf of Venezuela. It's an old Spanish house, nestled away, high above the water. It bears none of the hallmarks of French architecture that have become commonplace since the end of the Proxy Wars. The buyer speaks an in-and-out mixture of Spanish and French, sort of a bastard creole of Guianese – but not the same dialect you'd hear in Cayenne or Caracas.

I head into the city and make my way to Le Petit Palomo. The place is dead at this hour. I order a caipiroska from a tight little blonde in a low-cut shirt. She recognizes me from the last time I was here, five or six months ago. I hope she doesn't spit in my drink.

I use the place's network and log in, trying to arrange a few more jobs here in South America. Before I can even go through my security procedures, one of the bar's skots comes up and sits down next to me. She's wearing a miniskirt and essentially a sports bra, and high heels.

You can program a beacon into your pad, send out a signal to keep these things away. If you'd been to the Palomo in those days, you'd know the bar isn't strictly a flesh club – blokes come to shoot billiards or follow the game or shoot the shit. It's semi-classy, could bring a date here if you were so inclined. You just have to be sure you've got that beacon activated before you gentlemanly pull out your girl's chair and order her a beer.

I have in recent years become more sly as to when and when not to turn on that beacon, as you can see, yet on that particular afternoon, it was off. And they swarm me like locusts on wheat.

“What's your name?” one asks in a somewhat lower class Guianese dialect.

“Get lost,” I reply in English.

She immediately switches to English, taking on me Aussie accent. “My name's Lucille.”

“I said...” I look up to her. Her name, Lucille, and her general body type. It strikes me. “Stand up,” I say. “How tall are you? Step out of the heels, would you?”

She's the exact perfect size. Stands just right, hips are the right ratio, shoulders exact. Breasts are a little big perhaps, but that can be corrected. And the general layout of her face, her cheekbones, her jawline.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Lucille.”

“No,” I say. “Lucie. Your name's Lucie.”

“All right, sweetheart, sure.”

I return to my pad, link with her. I fix the breasts, change the hair colour, grow it out a couple centimetres. I flatten her lips a bit and lose some of the makeup.

“Ooo, I'm liking this new look, sweets.”

I scan the net, find a news clip with Lucie in it.

The algo immediately kicks in. The skot puts a hand on my forearm, says, “Now sweetie, you know I can't do that.”

I smile innocently, give her a big dumb look. I stand and lean in for a hug. I grab her ass. She goes to hug me, too, and I reach my hand up, slip a chip into the maintenance port behind her left ear.

I step back. She blinks, her pupils dilating out of sync. She betrays herself with a few oddly mechanistic jolts and movements. Then she's back to normal, smiles once more. I'm already typing on my pad.

She's the spitting image of Lucie.

The waitress brings me my drink. She's taken her sweet time with it. “Very pretty,” she says with no enthusiasm. I take the drink. The barmaid's got a bolt through her ear, lip ring, pierced eyebrow. I wonder if her nipples are pierced. Her clit? I wonder if Lucie has a pierced nipple. I slip the waitress a redback and return to the skot.

On my pad, I find a podcast wherein Lucie gave an interview, give the skot her new voice. Gone is the bad Aussie accent and now she's got that received pronunciation.

"John," she says, "let's get a room." She leans in and whispers, "I can't wait to finger that cute butt of yours."

I look at the podcast on the screen. Lucie's apparently discussing her time in uni, and at some point during that ninety minutes, must have said something about prostate stimulation. Perhaps she's not such a goody girl after all. I may have to give this podcast a listen on the next train ride.

"John Galveston," comes a voice in English. Thick French accent. "I was starting to wonder if you were dead," he grins, "or locked away in a Chosunese labour camp." He shakes my hand and pats me on the back.

"Guy," I reply shaking my head. "You should know I'm better than that." I give him a smug grin and he just shakes his head.

His eyes go to the skot. "She's cute."

I tell the skot to get lost. (I don't de-link from her on the pad.)

Guy yells to the bartender. "Whatever he wants is on the house," he says.

The bartender, rinsing a glass, does not seem impressed.

I've known Guy for about four years now. He used to be a runner, one of many who'd run out the train without any more money. He stranded himself in Niger, deep in the frontiers of Russian Africa. He put out that standard rescue email, and languished there for months before someone graciously responded. That someone was me – yes, I didn't tell Lucie about that one. Guy's a mate, and one of the few people I'd make a run into Russian territory for. I accepted a job in the Congo, and ran heroin up into the Russian deserts to get him out. Not proud of that one, but I helped a mate.

Guy retired after that and bussed tables in Cayenne until he had enough money for a down payment on this place.

He motions to the billiards table and we each pick up a cue. "What have you been up to?" he asks.

"Chauffeur-ing a journo out of Falkland," I reply. "She's doing a story on those forest fires."

"Natural Agenda," he nods as he takes a shot.

I nod. "The Seppo feds might be involved in it. She's researching some financial bloke that might know something."

He smiles in the silence before asking the question. "You bang her?"

I shrug. "I wined and dined her on the trip up. We sixty-nined. She blew it on me face. Yeah, gushed – just a touch, mind you, but she definitely peed a bit when I slipped me index in her pooper."

"You're such a bullshitter, Galveston," he says.

I smirk. "She wouldn't bite."

The bartender brings Guy a stubby of beer. I down the caipiroska and signal I want another. Guy and I talk for a few minutes, catching up, bouncing the cue ball back and forth, before the bartender returns with my drink and interrupts us.

"Shh," she says as she scurries over with the new drink. She has her pad out, is flipping through the channels. "Breaking news."

She arrives at an American channel, where a map of Tanzania fills the screen.

I feel a certain pull in my gut.

"Again," a Yankee voiceover from an anchor announces, "if you're just tuning in, we're receiving reports that Russian ground forces have overtaken Dodoma, the capital of the disputed territory of Tanzania."

Our pool game comes to a grinding halt. Both Guy and I turn our undivided attention to the screen.

"Joining me now via satellite is our military analyst, retired Colonel Peter Howard. Colonel, this conflict has been going on now, off and on, since the war. Could you explain for our viewers just what the significance of this is?"

"Of course," says the colonel, appearing on a split-screen. "Prime Minister Ajali has long been

the de facto ruler of – if not Tanzania as a whole, then certainly the immediate are around Dodoma. The Russians have a heavy garrison in the north of the territory – with regional governors, believed by many to have been bought or coerced, supporting joining the African Federation. The British, for their part, control large portions of the south, a stalemate left over from the war.”

I watch in horrified fascination.

“Representatives from South Africa have expressed support of the local Dodoma government. Ajali has shown British sympathies in the past, though he does lean heavily separatist.”

“British have pursued a policy of appeasement, is that correct?”

“For the most part. However, there are differences of opinion on that front. Pretoria and Port of Sahul see things rather differently. The Russians – or, at least, elements of the financial and political elite – want a unified federal republic, and have asserted claims on Tanzania since the beginning of the war. A handful of oligarchs established lucrative fiefdoms there, which the Tanzanians – and the British – undermined greatly.”

“The fall of Dodoma is a major change in the ongoing detente. How does this differ from any other skirmish or military action?”

“Tanzania has been plagued for decades with ongoing separatist campaigns. These range from the innocuous – street protests, mass demonstrations – to the more violent. Train bombings, assassinations of prominent bankers and investors, sabotage on the front lines. President Oeljanov has long ignored or downplayed this violence, but with the death of Pavel Lusenko last week...”

“Oeljanov’s a fucking warmonger,” Guy mutters, shaking his head. “Let the Ugandans and the Sudanese vote and see how long this war continues.”

“The Russians seizing Dodoma,” the colonel continues, “implies that Oeljanov no longer cares to find a diplomatic solution. If that is the case, then this war may only be in its infancy.”

“The question that all our viewers want to know,” says the anchor, “is World War IV is on the horizon?”

God, they’re even using the term WWIV now.

“We may not be dealing with another world war here, Geraldo,” the colonel replies solemnly. “What you’re implying is a nuclear attack, which would surely escalate things into a global conflict, yet that scenario differs from what we’ve seen in the past. Nine nuclear weapons were deployed during the war, yet all were fired against non-nuclear nations. Iran, Kenya, Southern Chosun – they had no means to retaliate in kind.” He pauses. “The British do.”

“Mutually assured destruction,” the anchor – Geraldo – nods.

“Absolutely,” responds the colonel. “If the British engaged in a ground war in response to this Russian aggression, and the situation escalated to the exchange of nuclear weapons... the term, as you mentioned, is mutually assured destruction. MAD: the most perfect acronym if ever there was one. It’s the reason why this conflict never escalated into a full-blown ground war in the past.”

“Do you believe nuclear warfare could be seen in the near future?” asks Geraldo.

“I won’t minimize things – it’s a possibility,” he replies bluntly.

They blather on for a few minutes using fancy political terms to try and describe this war, yet the motives behind this conflict are as simple as they are stupid, and we all know it. The Russians and the Brits both drew their own border across Africa after the war, and the lines happened to cross at Tanzania. Car bombings, sniping, pot shots, skirmishes, sanctions, digital warfare – it’s all because of a difference of opinion on the bisection of Africa.

Looking out the front window I see Lake Maracaibo, an inland lake in Venezuela to the east. I have a sudden mental image of a mushroom cloud stretching into the sky.

I order another caipiroska, which I have to make myself, the bartender transfixed on the screen. When I leave Le Petit Palomo, I completely forget about the override chip I left in that skot. That thing was worth three hundred quid.

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