

Jason and the Astronauts

JOHN HEILMAN

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One

The Trip South

Bruce called it their “junket.” It was spring break, and the two snowbirds from New Jersey were migrating to the forests of Brazil. For Nick Casperson it could be a career boost. His observations at the SETI Center two weeks previously might be earthshaking.

A more mundane explanation was probable. It may have been a piece of “space trash” overcome by the earth’s gravity, causing it to depart the orbiting graveyard of senescent satellites and plunge into the forest. More likely still it may have been a meteorite, a chunk of rock stripped from a comet.

Nick was drawn to the dramatic when it came to long-shot expeditions. At heart, he was an explorer. He had followed the Roswell story since childhood. The scientist in him scoffed at the tale, but the dreamer in him tugged at his curiosity. Those in search of extraterrestrial intelligence use science for their job, but like Verne, Bradbury, and Asimov at times they stray into a fictional world, for the sake of self-preservation.

Bruce Bonner had been his friend since kindergarten. Like binary stars they were tethered to each other, now teaching as colleagues at the same college. Nick asked Bruce to accompany him on the junket. Bruce’s charm and easy manner were qualities that complemented his more serious companion. Their relationship was free of the encumbrance of competition or envy. They shared a wordless understanding and mutual regard that was almost symbiotic.

Nick understood Bruce’s vulnerabilities, including his ongoing bout with discipline. He also knew that the forest would attract Bruce like a bee. Where one might stop for the sights, smell the roses, and dally in the excursion, the other was clearly serious, goal-driven, and worked to a schedule. It was as if each needed these traits in the other, for team balance. It had been this way from the point of memory, growing as boys into classmates in the schools of anthracite Pennsylvania, then to fellowship, as men.

Physically, they weren’t at all close. Nick was the rounder of the two, from the face down. He was of moderate height and medium build. He sported a sand-colored brush haircut. His person in fact exhibited no distinguishing feature. He was average in appearance and could easily pass unnoticed in a crowd, and usually did. He shunned attention, as well. Bruce was half a foot taller than his expedition leader. His angular attractiveness carried from his face, literally to his feet. His sleekly delineated muscles enhanced a carriage that was both confident and flexible. He was athletic. His hair was

dark brown and full. His lips were relaxed and the subtle squint of his brown eyes suggested a hint of sarcasm behind his relaxed manner.

Officially, Bruce was an instructor at the college. His biology labs were popular with students, and his sense of adventure had stretched the chancellor's permissiveness. In fact, his relationship with Throckmorton was strained, and it was only through Nick's insistence that Bruce was included. To travel with his friend, and perhaps help him make a significant discovery would be reward enough. To spend nine magical days in the paradise of a diverse Brazilian rain forest had been a lifelong dream.

Something violent happened on the plateau north of Manaus, the capital city of Amazonia and the world's former rubber Mecca. The region did not lie on that part of the so-called Ring of Fire, known as the Pacific Rim, where the Nazca and South American plates meet along the west coast of South America. An earthquake was unlikely. Besides, the Survey's seismographic recording showed neither P nor S waves characteristic of quakes. Instead, the record suggested a surface shock as the initial disturbance, with ripples followed by blips, indicating fallout. Whatever it was, it had set off the sensors that comprise the Geological Network in South and Central America. Bruce impishly remarked it might have been Chuck Yeager breaking the sound barrier for the Brazilian Air Force. He saved that for Nick, after finishing his interview with Throckmorton. Nick appreciated it was impossible to examine in detail the records of every geologic event around the globe, particularly in remote spots. The oceans swallow up most extraterrestrial matter. His own interests were tuned both to the radio universe and to highlighted data garnered from the U.S. Geological Survey.

What riveted Nick's attention most was a report from the huge radio telescope at Arecibo, Puerto Rico. The Garden State Observatory and its Center devoted to the search for extraterrestrial intelligence was located on the Jersey side of the Delaware River watershed in the mountains. The Center possessed a twenty-inch optical refractor and a small radio dish with which it participated in the all-sky survey known as the Argos Project. The Center also had access to data from the SETI Institute in California.

The institute provided data from three radio observatories: the Very Large Array in New Mexico, Arecibo's huge stationary dish in Puerto Rico, and the 2.3-acre moveable Greenbank dish in the mountains of West Virginia.

The mysterious finding that evening in March was a fleeting signal picked up at Arecibo. Its Doppler analysis showed a "blue shift," indicating the source was moving toward the earth at a velocity of around Mach 3. The 10-kilohertz signal was picked up virtually at the same time as the shockwave in the Brazilian forest was recorded. Were the two observations connected? Were they coincidental? Was one an artifact? Were they both artifacts? Double skepticism was wagered against the miniscule chance of a historic event.

Nick's fascination with Roswell had inspired his interest in the U.S. Geological Survey and earth surface events. He felt he wouldn't have much competition for this hunt, since most scientists scoffed at the idea of alien visits to earth. They made the argument of distance, and it was compelling. The universe was thought to have a radius of 10 billion light-years. Over two hundred planets had been discovered, orbiting stars fifty to two hundred light-years away, suggesting there were millions more. The star 61 Cygni was

only ten light-years away. Flying a spaceship with current technology at a cruising speed of ten miles a second, or 1/18,600th the speed of light, it would take two thousand centuries to get to this star. We'd have to find a wormhole or develop a speedster that would close in on  $c$ , the speed of light. Our modern spaceships were jalopies, in comparison.

But maybe others had solved this limitation. If they've come, they likely hadn't spotted our signal. Our calling cards aboard the Pioneer and Voyager probes had now gone thirty light-years' distance, give or take a few billion miles. Our oldest radio broadcasts had traveled out roughly ninety light-years. Frank Drake, the father of radio astronomy, predicted a half-century ago that many planets existed beyond our solar system. This had now been confirmed. Physicist Enrico Fermi once asked over lunch, "Where is everybody?" He was referring to life that was both intelligent and technically advanced. Nick and hundreds of searchers like him still asked the same question. Search methods were improving with the pace of computers, doubling in capability every eighteen months. The Kepler space telescope slated for launch in 2008 would continuously look at one hundred thousand stars for the transit of an earth-sized planet. Still, it was a frustrating enterprise. A secret part of Nick was ablaze with confined anticipation.

It had been with some urgency that Nick approached the grant committee. The college accelerated their passport and visa processing. Vaccinations were arranged. The handling of paperwork was streamlined, and Nick agreed to complete his expedition within a narrow time frame. With competent guides using rivers for transport, he promised to produce some answers at the end of the nine-day spring break.

The travel agent for the college set up the itinerary. It involved a red-eye Varig flight from Miami to Rio de Janeiro. The following morning they would fly into the old delta town of Belem and meet their first host, a man called Raphael De Sanctos. Raphael was the owner operator of the Para River Transport Company and would fly them to the interior city of Manaus, where they would launch on the massive Rio Negro, with their second guide.

In its short history, the college had sent only two other faculty members to South America for research. An anthropologist once pawed around Machu Picchu for Incan remains and a poli-sci don had spent some time studying the origins of Chile's constitutional government.

The packing crate required two men to carry it. They checked the crate and their duffels through to Belem, on northern Brazil's Atlantic coast. Bruce's part of the gear was Spartan. To his minimal clothes list he added a three-piece fly rod. He had done this, mindful of once when he curbside checked his new graphite on the front end of a fly-in fishing trip to Canada only to have it pilfered, leaving him with only the memory of its impressive action. Bruce carefully tracked the duffels and crate into the hold on this first leg.

Once they were airborne Bruce signaled a neatly dressed stewardess. She waved off a nearby male attendant and appeared next to Nick, who occupied the aisle seat. She leaned over the space between them, causing Nick to sink back in his seat.

"May ah help you, sir?"

“Yes, you may. Can you please see to it that we have as much quiet as possible? The professor here is trying to study his charts.”

She smiled as she looked at Nick and the map spread across the empty seat. Then she turned and puffed up a pillow for an elderly woman across the aisle. Nick shot a quizzical glance at Bruce.

“Bruce, old man, don’t kid around with these people. You’ll scotch the whole trip. Flying these days is a serious thing, in case you’ve never flown before.”

“I know her Nick. She’s got a fine sense of humor.”

The man diagonally across the aisle turned and smiled faintly at both of them.

“You’d better know her very well.”

The prim stewardess returned.

“Mr. Bonner, would either you or the professor like a newspaper?”

“Would you happen to have Vogue, or Mademoiselle?”

“Ah am so sorry...no, but there are some fashions featured in the Airline Magazine in that pouch in front of you. If you need anything, just push that little button, up there. Oh, I’m sorry, Professor...”

She turned to attend a woman with a fussy child.

“Okay, Bruce, you’ve impressed me. Your reputation is probably international. By the way, what’s her name, and how long have you known her, if I may ask?”

“Christine. We chatted while I got held up in first class and you were stashing your carry-on. I went over the routine with her then. Told her you needed peace and serenity.”

“Thanks for your consideration. And she just played along?”

“Without fee, Kemo Sabe. Lighten up. I don’t want you to burn out, the first night.”

“Roger, Tonto.”

Bruce winked at Christine when she shot by en route to the galley.

Nick settled in to his review. The sector maps of the forest wilderness north of Manaus to the Venezuelan border included topographic relief, seasonal rain data, the names of rivers, parks, and escarpments, as well as general locales of indigenous peoples. Nick had looked over the inventory several times. It included a two-man tent with mosquito netting, sleeping bags, plastic sterile bottles for taking specimens and samples, two army collapsible shovels, a core sampler, survival kits, a half dozen disposable waterproof cameras and batteries plus Nick’s digital, rain gear, Dacron pants and aerated long-sleeved shirts, wide-brimmed hats, waterproofed and worn-in hiking boots, lots of sunblock and insect repellent, trail mix and dried fruit, a chart depicting regional poisonous snakes and frogs, Bruce’s fishing gear, a simple dictionary of Portuguese terms, a satellite transponder telephone, antibiotics and a first aid kit with anti-dysenterics, Tylenol with codeine pills, chloroquine, and a record of their recent vaccinations. The friendly folks at the local Public Health Department had dutifully shot them up with vaccines against cholera, yellow fever, hepatitis A, and typhoid.

Somewhere over the Smokey Mountains Nick fell asleep and Bruce began reading the book Nick loaned him. When they deplaned in Miami, Bruce was careful to assure Christine they had a most pleasant ride. She invited them both to fly her friendly sky again.

During their layover at Miami International, Bruce bought some polarized sunglasses, the kind that accentuates greens and yellows of the forest. He had used them while fishing once. For him they provided a poor-man with a cheap psychedelic experience, especially when accompanied with music. Bruce also brought his iPod. A swingman's hat bearing the logo of the Royal Flying Doctor's Service finished out his shopping spree at MIA. He drooped the hat around the back of his neck.

"Nice hat. Where did you find it?"

"It's from the Land of Oz."

"Have you brushed up your Strine?"

"Hey, for our next trip we can visit that satellite tracking station on the mountain out there in Alice."

"Let's make the best of this one first. I have just one request, so far."

"Yes, Professor?"

"Give the ladies a break on this trip, Casanova."

"Alrite mate, but the shielas are out there just the same. Do you know what you are asking, Monsenior?"

Nick nodded and rolled his eyes.

The flight to Rio was bumpy. Bruce read further into Tomlinson's *The Sea and the Jungle*. It was a little-known book that Nick plucked from his explorer collection. It had been written by a man who took his own dare. In 1909, he quit his newspaper job in Wales, kissed his wife and kids good-bye, and boarded a coal-loaded steamer bound for the remotest outposts of the upper Amazon. After three years of high adventure, he returned and resumed his former life. His family had remained in place. Nick assigned it neither as a hint, as Bruce had no family, nor as an endorsement of wanderlust. The autobiography contained a valid description of the region, and perhaps things hadn't changed that much. Bruce made heady progress before the chardonnay overtook him.

Nick was careful to keep a clear head. He mused most of his waking hours. He thought of the Roswell incident. He had written a paper about it in grade school, where it was then better received than any reference might bring at the college, today. The story had made a big splash at the time, before astronomers knew as much about the size of the Cosmos. He had once attended the annual alien jamboree in Roswell, which had become the "Groundhog Day" of the Southwest.

No matter which version one accepted, something crashed out there in the desert of New Mexico, in 1947. When a cowboy reported it to the town's sheriff, who in turn reported it to the military, things quickly got dicey. The Army condoned off the area and secrecy set in, big time. Two debris fields said to contain strange materials were officially attributed to a downed weather balloon. Nick knew that the Japanese during WWII sent seven

thousand high-flying “vengeance balloons” across the Pacific in the trade winds. A few hundred of these bomb-fitted balloons hit the U.S. and Canada. This was kept secret at the time to avoid providing feedback to the enemy. It was too much of a stretch to promote the idea that one of these descended after floating for three or four years around the earth.

The military promoted the weather-balloon version of the story and had stuck to it right up to the present. Project Mogul was a better explanation. This was an attempt to monitor Soviet nuclear testing using a string of constant altitude balloons with sensors. This wouldn’t explain the embellishments that grew up around the more dramatic version—the mortician who claimed the Army asked him for preservatives and inquired if he could make some caskets forty inches long. But it might explain the ultra-defensive posture by the military. The large-headed alien figures made popular on page and screen originated from a cartoonist’s rendering at the time. Then there was “Brownie’s” story. Brownie was a military guard who had been there and “told all” before he died in London many years later. The lack of a “the straight story” frustrated Nick. He hoped he could come up with definite and unequivocal answers this time, for the college. If asked about their mission, he instructed Bruce to simply say they were on a science project to collect meteorite fragments.

Nick’s thoughts shifted over to Vera and Jason while Bruce slept. Nick had never spent much time away from Vera and this would be the record. He wondered about his wife’s growing concern about Jason, their son. She had received a report from one of his teachers. The teacher said Jason was prone to “lecturing” the class. When Jason was confronted, he referred to the First Amendment. Jason cited something one of his father’s colleagues told him at his eighth-grade graduation party: “It’s not plastics anymore, young man. Plastics are here to stay. You’ve got to focus these days on context!”

Jason figured this to mean it was not enough to ask “the what” of something that was said, or printed. You had to know who said it, and why. In other words, use your noggin’ and stay skeptical. Don’t fall for a bunch of jive from anyone, and keep your brain in shape. Don’t use drugs. Nick was pleased enough with this and thought Vera was a little too sensitive. Jason’s mind was awakening and he was simply flexing his mental muscles in his classes. Nick felt that was a good thing, as he dozed away in the solitude of his thoughts.

Sunlight flashed across the aisle and roused them both. The sight of Rio’s harbor was breathtaking and unique. A towering statue of Christ stood high over the mountainside favelas. These makeshift dwellings, in turn, overlooked the metropolis that spread out to the sea below. Sugarloaf Mountain rose out of the surf, and tiny cable cars moved slowly to and fro, buffeted by blasts of wind blowing in from the sea. Sunbathers and swimmers spanning every shade of brown contrasted with the crystalline white beaches that rimmed the city.

Their transport to Brazil was a miracle when set against the ardor of pioneers and seafarers of old. Here was a new country, in a new continent. They would catch their flight to Belem in a few short hours and another adventure would unfold. They cleared immigration with ease, presenting their passports and certificates from the college with a

letter from the Department of the Interior in Brasilia. The letter spelled out the “rules of engagement” should they enter a national park.

Their flight to Belem was turbulent, once again. During the flight a European-looking man in a white silk suit accidentally splashed his coffee onto Nick’s notebook while swiveling out of the seat in front. In a quick and embarrassed exchange he produced an embroidered handkerchief, only to be trumped by Bruce’s bandana. Taking quick note of Nick’s maps and journal, the man handed over his card and apologized. Nick made light of the matter and smartly planted the card in his wallet but not before he glanced at it after the gentleman passed. Santiago Rus was a merchant and dealer in gemstones who lived in Santarem, a town upriver in the interior.

Belem was an old colonial city named after Bethlehem. It lay on the edge of Guajara Bay in the vast Amazon Delta. Each day here at the equator brought the same amount of daylight. They would have nine days, each with more than twelve hours of illumination. It was now late in the afternoon. The weather here was reported in terms of inches of rain, rather than the customary seasons they were used to at home. The rainy season was due to the Antarctic Current as it collided with warmer water masses to the north. Fortunate for their purpose, they had arrived on the back edge of the wet.

The plane banked for landing. They were awed by the sight of muddy tentacles of the Great River, reaching out to sea. The tidal bore was visible as the South Atlantic collided with the Amazon’s effluence. The vast forest to the west filled their view like a green ocean. They nodded to Rus as they stepped into the air of their new world...air that felt like a furnace, and breathed heavy, like a steam shower. At the baggage depot Bruce spotted a sign marked Bonnier & Caspin below the name Para River Transport. The sign was held high by a rotund little man. He was wearing sandals, white poppers, and a blue silk shirt. His trousers encompassed a robust girth and were doubly supported by red suspenders and a caiman-hide belt. A straw fedora crowned his jocund face. His teeth were highlighted by a gold-plated incisor, which flashed as he alternately spoke and smiled. As they approached, he seemed to bounce with satisfaction at such a ready meeting. He pumped their arms with gusto and introduced himself as...“Rawwfe...el.” He led them to a platform where they waited for their crate and duffels. He waved continuously at vendors and guards as he talked nonstop in a curious blend of broken English and Portuguese. He seemed to talk to himself, to his guests and to the host of porters in a continuous flow. The gear arrived unscathed, and the three men transported the complete inventory to the company’s Rover.

Raphael drove into the town, passing a government complex. He came to a sprawling market next to the port. A flotilla of dugouts and riverboats loaded with jute, cane, coffee, fruits, and nuts from the interior was moored along the causeway next the huge square. Ocean freighters loaded with timber and ore shared the waterway with native farmers and merchants. Bands were playing patriotic songs and lively dance music. Belem’s Carnival was a few weeks away, and the musicians were tuning up. The esplanade leading into the market was peppered with jugglers, minstrels, clowns, hustlers, and pimps, in addition to the gathering crowd.

Raphael double-parked his transfer and winked at a traffic guard. He escorted his charge into the marketplace. His short stature was no impediment to his tilted progress toward a

bistro on its far end. Confidently, he pushed his way through to the bar and signaled the waiter, barking out orders. He knew his patrons were hungry. Bowls of feijoada—black beans and pork stew—were quickly provided along with pao de queijo—cheese rolls. The bartender arrived with a pitcher of capirinha. The two travelers waited for Raphael's signal before they ate. Bruce took a thirsty rip at the limejuice laced with sugarcane liqueur. Their host was unable to suppress a laugh. He quickly pointed to the Hotel Cabral, where they would stay this night.

The next half hour was comprised of short stabs at small talk punctuated with serious eating. Travel generates a curious hunger. Nick checked his watch. Raphael had reserved their room and offered to help them check in. Bruce opted for another drink and told his mate he would be over in an hour or so. Nick suggested a curfew for his friend. He reminded Bruce they would have to have their wits in the morning. The two parted in the square with a fraternity handclasp. Nick disappeared with Raphael into the growing mass of celebrants.

Bruce attempted to walk toward the boats, now bubbling with commerce. The music was building, and a trumpet seared the left side of his brain as a band passed in the opposite direction. Suddenly people of all hues were dancing and singing. The scent of mango and hibiscus perfumed the air. He thought he caught a whiff of orange blossom floating through the mélange. Toucan and parrots were beginning to settle in the trees. He felt like he was being pulled toward a little park that now made itself visible. Fairly buzzed, he managed himself with grace. His angular fitness and easy carriage attracted as much interest as the whiteness of his skin. He had slipped his wallet into a zipped compartment so that a pickpocket would have to strip him to profit.

The atmosphere was ecumenical. A gibbous moon hung in the sky. A string of riverboats lined the dock and an Andean band close by soothed the warm air with rhythms from their woodwinds and percussives.

For a moment Bruce felt like he was rising, almost flying. He found a spot on a park bench and sprawled himself in the glow of this new world. He closed his eyes and tried to sharpen his hearing and sense of smell.

After an undetermined time, he became aware of a large dark-skinned man sitting at the other end of the bench. He was speaking Portuguese and waving his arms in the air, as if addressing a political rally. Feeling the full impact of the capirinhas now, Bruce tried to swing himself off the bench and onto his feet. He nearly fell on the grass, partly because his leg had fallen asleep. He sat down again and concentrated. The half-sleep on the flights was catching up and the newness of the place was slowly sinking in.

He fell asleep for an unknown period and when he awoke the sun had dropped below the trees. He was sure he would remember the hotel. He thought he remembered having it pointed out to him. Surely, if he went back to the bistro it would all fall into place. He closed his eyes again and listened to the rhythms. When he opened his eyes after a while, a pretty Brazilian girl in her late teens was seated where the old man had been. Her head was turned toward him and she was smiling.

A group of girls were dancing the bossa nova in front of the bench and speaking to each other amidst the very audible music. They were entertaining the two on the bench. Bruce



turned again to admire the girl. Light from the lanterns bounced off her dark eyes. Her innocence captivated him. Surely the mirth of her friends had been purchased with prankishness. She signaled him to dance with her and the girls laughed. He smiled back at her. The echo of Nick's admonition pierced his mind. He then leaned over and kissed her hand. He got up carefully and bowed graciously to the chorus. The girls stood still, a bank of frozen expressions. He made his way to the hotel after only once retracing his path. There was a key for him at the desk.

Two

### Up the River and Into the Woods

Nick's alarm clock chimed in the sixth hour with gusto. He had awakened, chipper and springy a half hour before, not missing the lost two hours of longitude. He had showered. Bruce required the blare of his radio in the morning. As he tried lathering with cool water, he answered cryptically Nick's tepid questions about the jubilee the night before.

Nick had already dressed and readied his duffel before realizing he'd left his watch in the bathroom. It was one of those all-purpose waterproof types. Out of habit he protected it from water. It displayed the phases of the moon and the dates and times of eclipses. Raphael was due in the lobby in thirty minutes. When Nick offered Bruce an aspirin he was advised: "Never before shaving." In minutes, Bruce had slapped on some light clothes. Nick checked the room thoroughly before they made their way to the lobby.

Raphael was reading a newspaper when they arrived. His garrulous nature had not abandoned him. Raphael briefed Nick on the plans for the day while Bruce explored the hotel gift shop for some cigars and his own bottle of aspirin. For breakfast they had bacon, cornbread, mango, and guava juice, after which they settled their accounts. They hoisted their duffels and met the new day, which happened to be Sunday.

The three headed for the battered and track-worn Rover. The morning air was torpid, alleviated at times by a breeze. Raphael spirited them through back alleys and side streets where the city was still quiet. Soon, Raphael was on the boulevard to the airport. It took twenty minutes to reach the hanger. They pulled up to the vintage DC-3 that would convey them upriver. It was adorned with a large decal on the fuselage that read Para River Transport. Raphael perfunctorily surveyed their packing list and performed a mental X-ray on the crate, making especially sure the men had their bags. Several porters loaded the three items as the two novices from New Jersey prepared to board. To the idle of the radial engines, the porters positioned and locked the mobile stairs. Raphael barked out something he had neglected to tell Nick at breakfast. Two more passengers would be joining them on their flight into the country.

Bruce pointed out a small oil splotch on Nick's shirt collar as they ascended the movable steps. Before embarking, Raphael surveyed the equipment presently being loaded by a forklift. It was bound for Santarem, their only stop on the way. After taking their seats, Nick went over Raphael's earlier conversation with Bruce.

Raphael had told Nick he had spoken earlier with their guide, Jaro, in Manaus. Jaro had been in contact with the Indian Service so he had an understanding of their target destination. They would be ferried up the great black river in motorized boats. Hopefully, they would reach their site by midday Wednesday, D-5. They might have chartered a

flight into the national park and carried small packs to the site, but that would have taken as much time and the walk was more strenuous than Jaro's option. Besides, Jaro thought the river trip worth the experience, by itself. The waterways were more easily navigated at the end of the rainy season.

Raphael cut the port engine. Shortly afterward, a distinguished-looking gentleman entered the bay. He greeted the two foreigners in a terse manner and found a seat across from them. He looked a little out of place on this modified cargo carrier in his tailored suit and sunglasses. When the man changed glasses to read a paperback—something about an elaborate heist of a famous painting—Bruce recognized him as the man who spilled coffee on their last flight. The man glanced up at Bruce and smiled faintly before returning to his read. As usual, Nick wasn't focused on social recall. When Bruce tried to signal Nick of their acquaintance, a woman with café-au-lait skin, and wearing a red dress entered and without a word or expression sat next to Señor Rus. Bruce took her for a model.

Raphael had customized the DC-3. Its seating mimicked that of a passenger train, with two groupings of four, pairs facing each other. There was a lot of leg room and space for a small table that could be anchored to the floor. The remaining space was designed for light cargo. A series of cages welded to the interior struts and fuselage were situated fore and aft, for balance. Nick surmised the arrangement probably wouldn't pass U.S. safety standards, but Raphael clearly made it work for his purposes.

Bruce was curious why the fashion set was flying on Raphael's cargo plane. Nick obliviously busied himself with his journal. When he finally recognized the man as Rus, Nick said hello. He was intrigued by the man's change in demeanor. Could this man who just smiled and buried himself in his book be the same person who offered his card so officiously the day before?

Four hours of sleep and three aspirins had helped chase the cobwebs from Bruce's head. His mind was still swimming with memories from the warm-up to Carnival. In his reverie, his eyes drifted toward the lady sitting diagonally across and facing him. She avoided eye contact and seemed blind to her fellow passengers, including the jewel merchant seated next to her. They all sat like pieces of chess, before takeoff.

After the machinery was loaded, a porter glanced at their seatbelts before joining Raphael in the cockpit. The next minute was filled with roar and vibration as they lifted to twenty-five hundred feet. Raphael headed the aircraft west on a 260-degree bearing. The fingers of the delta below seemed to stretch to the ocean like a giant hand. In a few minutes the mighty brown Amazon itself came to view. As they gained altitude it could be seen cutting a huge swath into the expanse of green that lay in front of them like an infinite carpet. Expectations soared as yet another leg of their journey opened.

Now cruising, Raphael's voice scratched over the intercom. His chopped English from the day before had given way to a more polished form. His memorized travelogue was underpinned by the hum of the engines. Raphael pointed out the power projects and manganese mines below. He said his land was rich in metals—iron and copper, gold, tin and chrome. Diamonds could be found near the Orinoco up north. With this, Rus shifted in his seat. These, with other precious gemstones and fine hardwoods, helped make up for the lost rubber trade. He mentioned how the Dutch had pirated a few rubber plants away

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