

24 Rule Britannia

Rule Britannia was a sitcom that ran in the late seventies, early eighties starring one Britannia Morgan, a ten-year-old waif from England. The premise was absurd: A black family adopts an orphaned U.N. diplomat's daughter. The diplomat and his wife were killed in a terrorist bombing, way before terrorism was in vogue, leading to "black" humor—that from the promotional material for the show. And so let the hi-jinx begin! Somehow it lasted five seasons. When the lights turned off, she turned to drugs and mild prostitution and, by 18, ended up in a halfway house, halfway to nowhere, the money gone and her parents divorced. Very typical. Very predictable. Hollywood in all its glory.

Somehow she crawled out from the burden placed on her by her selfish parents, cleaned up, and launched her second television show; this time as a crime fighting canine—no kidding—that sometimes turned into a teen. That lasted six years. Now on to the silver screen: She played supporting roles that became more serious as the years progressed and finally was nominated for an Oscar for her portrayal of a white crack queen in New Orleans who pushed her son hard and into medical school where he discovered the cure for addiction to cocaine just *after* she died from an overdose. You can't make this stuff up.

After a string of progressively degenerating comedies, the last being the rousingly funny—that being sarcasm—*Just Hit Me* she floated into her late 30s, adrift in a sea of irrelevance.

She hailed from the London's East End. Her cockney accent had mutated to a

Middle America hybrid with acute sinusitis that was surprisingly intoxicating; it invited most men to crawl into her like one would want to snuggle into a feather bed beside a roaring fire as a blizzard screamed outside.

Even the aloof Jack Whitte knew she was an actress and he had even seen some of her movies, though he couldn't recall them by name, but his admiration of her was from behind as her tight shorts stretched across her athletic buttocks. They climbed a medium hill beneath the tropical carpet and then took a sharp left, deeper into the jungle, as the trail became more severe. Whitte felt the burn in his lungs and his thighs.

"I appreciate you letting me come along," Whitte huffed. His trip with the athletic star had been at the suggestion of Gabby, his new nanny.

"Sure." There was no strain in her voice. *Very fit*, thought Whitte.

After another ten minutes, the climb ended and they turned right, onto a high cliff that abutted the Caribbean Sea. Whitte recalled standing on the plateau near Devil's River, the scrub and rocky terrain below. It seemed a century ago though it had only been a week.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Whitte turned around and Britannia was naked, stretching a beach towel across a smooth boulder. Yes, indeed, the sight was breathtaking. He turned back to sea, the turquoise tranquility crashing into the cliff base below.

"How long have you been on the island?" Whitte asked over his shoulder.

"Two days." If this woman knew who Whitte was and the probable international manhunt for him, she certainly wasn't letting on.

To the left he saw a small inlet with a white sandy beach, no more than twenty

yards wide. Palms reached out over the water, swaying in unison like holy rollers at a revival. Beyond was an island that appeared deserted. Whitte judged that it might be two miles away. In between he could see a white fishing boat with nets cast trawling the currents between the two landmasses. Could he swim it? Feeling the burn in his lungs and the sweat dripping from his brow, he knew it would take a day or so before the effects of his drugging and subsequent illness to wear off. He'd have to start exercising if he were going to give it a shot.

“How do you get down there?” he asked, turning back to see that she was now lying on the boulder, a pair of tanning peepers protecting her deep brown eyes from the penetrating rays from the high sun. She removed them and looked at Whitte, seemingly acknowledging his existence for the first time. She laughed.

“I’ve been kind of rude, haven’t I?”

“No, I figured you had a lot on your mind.” She was truly quite stunning, especially as the sweat began to bead on her taught stomach.

“Well, I guess I might.” She turned on her side, propped up by her elbow, as nonchalant as anyone would be fully clothed. Of course, she wasn’t. “I have a movie coming up. You know how athletes get their game face on. Well, that’s where I’m at. Sorry.”

“Understandable.”

“Go back to the trail and turn right. There are a couple of switchbacks and you’ll be on the beach in about five minutes.” She turned back on her back, replacing the eyeshade.

Whitte nodded. “Thanks.”

Even with the second Vitamin B shot kicking in, the hike down was more like ten minutes—yes, he needed a little more exercise in his life. He turned a corner, ducking around an island fig encased in thick vines, and was suddenly thrown into the bright clearing that was made all the more blinding by the reflection off the pale sand.

There's a constant haze in the Caribbean; an atmosphere that doesn't quite seem right; like you're peering through a slightly frosted glass. It hangs over the mountain islands like an incoherent thought in the back of your mind that you cannot quite recall. Whitte wondered if the haze was from the frigid waters of the deep Atlantic being pushed over the relatively shallow warm Caribbean. It didn't really matter; he was in the haze and he needed to get out.

He climbed onto a small rock outcropping, a remnant of an ancient volcanic flow, and sat, gazing off into the haze, trying to pull thoughts back into his mind. He was scared; scared like no other time in his life. Sure, he was devastated by Abigail's death but it was more than that. Selfishly, he realized, his life was irreparably transformed, no less changed than if his right arm had been chopped off. He would now have to learn how to do things left-handed.

The lawsuit had been like the Caribbean haze; something uncontrollable that ominously drifted over him; something that was the result of a fraud committed before he was a glimmer in his father's eyes (he had always mused over a theory that his father had knocked up his mom and was forced to do the "right" thing—why else was he an only child?). But the lawsuit provided the backdrop for murder; he had "killed" to save his own skin; to end the lawsuit that threatened to take his company away from him. It was all too

convenient.

He glanced back up to the cliff from where he had come. On a smooth boulder, he could just make out an edge of towel where Britannia was sunbathing. The cliff face was jagged and nearly vertical. He saw an indentation—maybe ten feet from the top—behind a small outcropping that might be a cave. The thought of climbing it, though, was out of the question; his body felt used and abused.

The water, however, was like an invitation to wash away his sins. He was wearing a pair of hiking shorts and he had a long trek back to the resort. From past experiences, hiking with wet shorts chaffed the hell out of his inner thighs—a polite way of saying other things got chaffed as well—so, glancing around, he took off his clothes and ran in and dove. The water was colder than it looked and as he surfaced and he fought back a primordial scream. He pushed back his longish hair and wiped his hand across the stubble on his face, feeling slightly unclean. He flipped and dived back in, touching the sandy bottom before floating back to the surface. Wiping the saltwater from his eyes, he glanced toward the green carpet of land two miles away. What island was that? It was too large to be another small atoll popping up from the deep. There had to be another large landmass nearby. It had to be one of the many major island chains strung out from the Florida Keys to Venezuela.

He wondered why he wanted to run. He had paid these people a large sum of money to shield him until the incident in Nassau was cleared up. It might be a month or even a year. Certainly they weren't holding him against his will.

He turned toward the large island and began to swim, far enough away to feel for

any strong currents. There didn't appear to be any.

A small ski boat seemed to appear out of nowhere—it's motor as quiet as a purring kitten—and it caught him off guard. Two men, wearing matching blue shorts and white sports shirts were glaring at him as the boat powered down, gurgling in the water. Both were bronzed statues of the perfect male complete with feathered blond hair. The term *Aryan Wunderkind* came to mind. Whitte turned and treaded water, trying to hide the fact that he was naked.

“Are you okay sir?” asked the one behind the wheel with a faint Germanic grunt. Wunderkind Two, at the stern, turned his attention back toward the shore, holding what appeared to Whitte to be some type of short machine gun.

Whitte waved his hand. “I'm okay, I'm one of your guests.”

“Yes, Mr. Whitte, we know.” The man with the gun spoke into a walkie-talkie and after a few moments, Wunderkind One called out, “Thank you, Mr. Whitte. Please be advised that you do not want to swim too far out. The current is strong, yes?”

Whitte smiled and waved back. “Thank you for your concern.”

They turned the boat and retreated to an area just east of the island and then drifted. He could see Wunderkind One watching him with binoculars. Maybe his initial assumption was incorrect; maybe he was here to stay.

Like breathing, there was a basic instinct within Whitte that prevailed in his heart that he had to be free, free from everything or anyone that could possibly control him. Of course he had never considered women and booze as a potential addiction that controlled him but maybe he was beginning to understand. All the same, he believed he was in a

situation that he could not control so, he decided, he would run but he needed to know where the hell he was and how the hell he was going to get off the island without being caught. What would happen to him if he were caught?

As he neared the shore, he realized he was no longer alone; the actress, back in her hiking shorts and shirt was sitting on a towel next to his discarded clothes. She had shown no modesty earlier and so as he emerged from the water, he kept his head up, trying his hardest to pretend he wasn't naked. As he drew near, her gaze lingered a little too long on his crotch. She was smiling. "Turn about is fair play."

"Thanks," he said as she threw him a towel. He dried as he would after coming out of the shower and dressed. She lit a cigarette and handed it to him.

"I found these in your pants. I hope you don't mind."

"What? That you lit one of my cigarettes or that you were in my pants?"

"Well, I hope that when I go through your pants in the future, it will be with your permission," she smiled slyly.

Whitte draped the towel on the sand next to her and sat. He held out his hand. "Jack Whitte."

She took his hand in a rather formal way. "Mr. Whitte. I'm glad to meet you. Britannia Morgan." She held on to his hand a moment longer than etiquette dictated and then let her fingers slowly pull free. "But you can call me Brita."

"Like the water filter?"

She nodded. She took one of his cigarettes and lit it, inhaling deeply and letting a steady stream escape her mouth. "I thought I had quit. You're quite a tempter, Mr. Whitte."

“Jack.”

“Actually, I’m supposed to call you Mr. Mango when we get back to Genesis.”

“Why’s that? Tough skinned but sweet inside?”

“No,” she chuckled, “and I’m going to be Ms. Blackcurrant. We all have code names so we can feel free to speak our minds without letting our names and status get in the way.”

“What, for this NASC shindig going on?”

“Exactly.”

“Can I ask what it is?”

“It is an informal gathering of businesspersons, politicians, media types, and even some of us in the arts to meet and greet along a central theme. We have two meetings a year. Once for regional actors to come together and another for those on the world stage. If we met in public there would be a paparazzi frenzy. This way we come together, speak our minds, see if there are commonalities we can work toward, and so on, without prying eyes.”

“So, this year’s event has something to do with fruit.”

“Yes. *From the Fruits of Our Labor.*” Brita smiled and took another long drag from the cigarette. “This feels so good. I wish I had never quit.” She stretched back and cocked her elbow into the sand and rested her head on her hand, her sun bleached brown hair falling from her neck. “I’ve been a terrible wanker to you.” She took another drag. “All that stuff about my game face. Not true. I just didn’t know what to say to you.” Whitte glanced down to her. She was truly quite alluring with that just-woken-up look. The eyes,

sitting above high cheekbones invited a man to come back to bed with her. Her jaw jutted out and squared her face, framing her full, pouting lips, begging to be gently kissed. Whitte turned away.

“You know my publicist tells me there is no such thing as bad publicity but in your case...” she let her voice trail off.

Whitte winced. “That bad?”

“Afraid so. The American press has already castrated you and the European press isn’t too far behind, not that you care what the Europeans think. And now with the Texas governor and all.”

“What about the governor?”

“You haven’t heard? He took his own life. Tragic. His heart was broken they say. Two victims. That’s the slant.”

Whitte closed his eyes. *Good God. Will it ever end?*

Brita reached out with her right hand and pulled him down next to her. “I am so sorry. I know what it’s like. I spent most of my twenties trying to live down my indiscretions.” She reached further and brushed the side of his cheek. The touch warmed him, his face flush; it was inviting him into her, the safe harbor that she offered. But he resisted. *I can’t do this anymore*, he told himself. She must have read his mind because in that briefest of moments—the touch, her warmth, the invitation—she pulled back, feeling his hesitancy. “I’m sorry for being so forward,” she said. “It’s just that there’s too much darkness in the world. No one should ever have to go it alone.” And just like that, the spell was broken and she sat up. She tossed the cigarette away from them and then pulled her

knees up with her arms. “I started partying when I was young and famous. No matter how good I would try to be, there was always another party, always another so called friend who meant well for me. For heavens’ sake, my parents weren’t my friends. It took ten years but I cleaned myself up and started working again. I’ve fallen a couple of times along the way but,” she smirked, “here I am.” She rocked forward and shot a glance over at Whitte who was now watching her.

“The week before the Academy Awards, some pictures of me doing some very unladylike things with three guys at once were published on the Internet. I think that must have cost me the Oscar. Of course, they were proven to be digitally altered but in the court of public opinion, I’m a slut. It didn’t help matters when the guy who published them ended up in an alley with two bullets in the back of his head.”

Whitte frowned. He had never heard any of this but of course he paid little attention to the Hollywood crowd.

“I didn’t kill him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Whitte laughed. “I would have killed him.” *Oh, God, that was stupid to say. Of course she would think I’d have no problem pulling the trigger.* “I mean that empathetically, not literally.”

She laughed, “Don’t worry, Jack. I know you didn’t kill that girl. Salvador told me and I believe him.” She resituated herself, opening her arms and stretching her legs.

“Besides, you’re too handsome to be a killer.”

Whitte smiled.

“Handsome in a rugged, cowboy sort of way. Cowboys are good guys and I know

you're a good guy, Jack." She looked back out to sea and saw the brilliant orange of the sun struggling to stay in the sky. "My, I don't want to try to hike in that jungle in the dark. Besides, I'm your escort for tonight. I need to make myself presentable."

Whitte stood and held his hand out to pull her up. "Well, Ms. Blackcurrant, I'm honored."

"Mr. Mango, you're such a lovely gentleman." When she stood, she leaned forward and gave him a peck on the cheek and she ran off into the jungle.

Watch it, Jack, he thought.