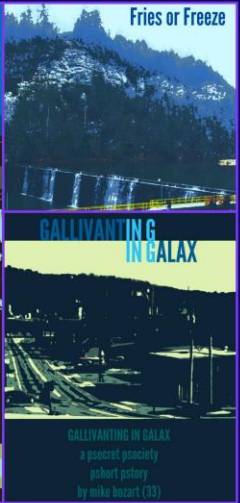


**Charlie West**

Fries or Freeze



**A DECEMBER TRIO**

**3 SHORT STORIES  
BY MIKE BOZART**

**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



**Charlie West** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | JANUARY 2017

**Charlie West**  
by Mike Bozart  
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A mild, sunny, halcyon December Thursday morning in eastern North America found my Filipina wife Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) in our gray 2005 Kia Rio hatchback, motoring northward up Interstate Highway 77 (aka I-77), nearing the North Carolina – Virginia state line. We were going to rent a car at CLT (the Charlotte airport), but when Advantage tried to slide in hundreds of dollars in additional charges, we politely declined the disadvantage. The cheerful counter clerk then candidly informed us that they had to do such, as some locals were not returning the cars. I thought: *What the hell! Who are they allowing to drive off in their almost-new cars? Don't they do any screening?*

The little 4-cylinder engine chugged up the Blue Ridge escarpment. A few miles into Virginia, a breathtaking view of the North Carolina piedmont opened up on the right.

“Nice view, isn't it, Agent 32?” *Agent 32? He's already in record mode. Unbelievable.*

“It certainly is, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] But, please keep your eyes on the road. Slow down! We're coming up fast on that creeping truck.”

I let off the gas pedal a little. An 18-wheeler was crawling up the mountain side. I then passed the semi on the left and settled in the center lane. *I wonder if Monique is getting hungry. I bet she is. She didn't eat any breakfast. She's going hypoglycemic, I can tell.*

“Want to stop in Wytheville for lunch?” I asked her.

Monique spied a sign. “Is that near Fort Chiswell?”

“Fort Jizzwell?” [sic] *He said that for the recorder.*

“Gosh, that's so vulgar, 33!”

“Frank [the late, great Agent 107, a dark-haired Caucasian dude who kind of looked like Bryan Ferry, circa 1975] and I called it that. We always got a chuckle out of it.” *They thought that was funny? Men!*

“I guess it's a male thing. Anyway, how far from Wytheville are we?”

“Just 27 minutes out, mahal.” [love in Tagalog]

“Ok, let's stop there.”

Soon we were sitting in the Appleby's (an American chain restaurant) on East Main Street (US 11). A very courteous African American waitress took our order. I looked over at

the bar, and remained fixated on it. *So, that's where Frank would go on Saturday nights, searching for new love.*

Monique noticed my incessant staring at the horseshoe-shaped bar. "Did you meet another agent at that bar, 33? Tell the truth. Don't lie."

"No, nothing like that, 32. It's where Frank would ply the local lasses a decade ago, looking for a compatible date. He told me that he would be doing ok until the girl found out that he hadn't gone to the local high school." *What?!*

"Really?" Monique asked with a stunned expression.

"That's what he told me, 32. He also said that he was at a further disadvantage, as he wasn't a ball-cap wearer, much less one to don one backwards."

"Did Frank drink alcohol at that bar, 33?"

"Yes, even though he never really liked doing such. He told me that he would nurse a Heineken for two hours, so as to not seem odd. I know that he would have loved to fire up a big bowl [of marijuana] instead."

"Oh yes, I'm sure of that, Agent 33."

Our waitress then returned with our food. Monique had a grilled chicken and rice dish. I just had a bowl of French onion soup. We ate without speaking; we were famished. *This soup is fairly tasty. I'd give it a 7.777777.*

I paid our bill thirteen minutes later. Under the tip I left the waitress a coupon for a free download of *Gold, a summer story* (my 2013 e-novel). Upon exiting, the ever-smiling waitress suddenly said: "Thank you, agents!" *Wow! I guess she overheard us. / I wonder if she will friend-request psecret psociety on Facebook. She seems game to it.*

Our journey continued up I-77. We were soon approaching the Big Walker Mountain Tunnel. I checked to make sure that the headlights were on.

Monique saw the tunnel's name next to the portal. "Is there a Little Walker Mountain Tunnel, too, Parkaar?"

"I don't think so, Monique."

"Then, why the *Big*, 33?"

"It's probably a tall tale, 32, with a short ending."

"I just had to ask." She shook her head and sighed.

I had a quick laugh. She then smiled.

Soon we emerged from the northwest portal of the eight-tenths-of-a-mile-long (1.29 km) underground vehicular passage. Nineteen miles (30.58 km) later, we were entering the East River Mountain Tunnel.

“When we emerge from this one, 32, we’ll be in WV.” [West Virginia]

When we exited the second tunnel, Monique made a declaration: “That last tunnel is longer than the first one, 33.”

“How do you know this to be true, perspicacious Agent 32? Did you time our passages through both of them? But, what if our average speeds were different?”

“No, I didn’t time them, Agent 33.”

“Then how do you know that the latter tunnel is longer than the former?”

“It’s a psecret, [*sic*] 33, with a silent p. That last tunnel was a shade over a mile. [1.61 km] Am I right, Mr. Geo-Almanac?” [*sic*] *Mr. Geo-Almanac? What?*

“Well, yes, you are correct, 32. The East River Mountain Tunnel is 1.025 miles [1.65 km] long.”

The conversation ceased until we rolled past Flat Top Mountain. *I wonder if she remembers that sledding day.*

“Remember when we went sledding next to the Winterplace Ski Resort? Agent 66 [my son] was with us.”

“Not sure that I recall that, 33.” *What is he on about now?*

“We also tried snowboarding. I think that I made it 70 yards [64 meters] before falling. Agent 66 won, however, as he went 100 yards [91.44 meters] before toppling.”

“Oh, yes; I remember it now. We spent the night in Wytheville. You didn’t want to drive all the way back to Charlotte.” *Probably had roid rage.*

We stopped and paid at the Ghent Toll Plaza. Twenty-four minutes later, we were rolling into the Pax Toll Plaza to pay another two dollars.

“Is this the last one?” Monique asked.

“No, there is one more before Charleston, 32.”

“What do they use the toll money for, 33?”

“Well, initially it was used to pay off the cost of road construction. But, now it’s used for road maintenance, I

suppose. Once a highway goes toll, it rarely reverts back to being a freeway. State governments like that steady stream of revenue too much.”

“I’m glad you have cash in your wallet, 33. They don’t accept debit or credit cards.”

“Yeah, I researched this turnpike yesterday, 32.”

“That figures.” She giggled.

After another twenty-four minutes, we were clearing the Chelyan Toll Plaza. Interstate 64-77 then flanked the teal green Kanawha River all the way to Charleston. *The river is wider than I thought. / I bet that water is cold.*

When I saw the golden dome of the Capitol Building, I pointed it out (to the left) for Monique.

“Well, after 271 miles, [436 km] we’re finally here, Agent 32.”

“Where is our hotel?”

“Just a mile away,” I said as I veered for Exit 100.

Soon we were parking behind the Charleston Capitol Hotel, an older nine-floor inn on Washington Street that was in the process of being upfitted to become a Wyndham Garden Hotel. Our room – 301 – was definitely pre-remodel: The now-adhesion-less wallpaper had waves in it. But, other than that, it was a decent room for the money.

Monique unpacked our luggage as I examined the room for clues. I soon noticed that the casement window’s sashes were screwed so that they would not slide open.

“Monique, the window is locked.”

“Maybe someone committed suicide, and the hotel wants to prevent another fatal leap.”

“I don’t think that a leap from this window would be fatal, Agent 32. Come over and take a look.”

Monique walked over and saw that the flat roof of the second story was only 13 feet (4 meters) below. “If we had to evacuate quickly, we could jump onto that HVAC unit.” [It was only 8 feet (2.44 meters) below the sill.]

“Yes, we could, Agent 32, like in *Tiki Wiki*. [a previous short story] Never know when you’ll need an alternate exit.”

“Do you feel tired, Parkaar?”

“Surprisingly, not really, Monique. Want to tour the downtown on foot?”

“Sure! I want to take some pics and videos, 33.”

“Ok, let’s hit the streets of this town of Charles, Agent 32.”

At 3:47 PM we were walking down Leon Sullivan Way towards the Kanawha River. Monique stopped to take some pics of the patina-coated-spires of Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church.

Once across Kanawha Boulevard, we walked northwestward along a narrow riverside asphalt sidewalk. The sidewalk was level with the street curb, but just to the left, a very steep, grass-covered slope dropped down to a lower walkway some 25 feet (7.62 meters) or so below. If you weren’t paying attention – texting for example – you could take quite a nasty tumble. *Surprised there’s no railing. Very dangerous for bicycles and skateboards. Maybe they aren’t allowed on the upper walk. And, what about tipsy folks leaving pubs? Just one errant step. Has there not been a lawsuit yet? Not even any warning signs. I guess Charleston is not as litigious as Charlotte. Walker beware.*

“Watch your step, Monique. You could literally die if you landed the wrong way. No Facebooking here.”

“I hear you, Mr. Safety. But, unlike you, I can walk and chew gum. Don’t be so paranoid.” *Walk and chew gum? She must have got that phrase from my dad.*

“I’m paid to be paranoid, asawa.” [wife in Cebuano]

She just smiled.

A few minutes later we were passing under the mighty South Side Bridge, a Parker truss bridge. I looked back and noticed a stairway leading up to the road deck. *Ah, nice! The bridge allows for pedestrian crossings.*

“Want to walk across the bridge, Monique?”

“Maybe later, Parkaar. I think I’m feeling hungry again.”

“Ok, no problem, 32. Capitol Street is just ahead. Many good restaurants on that street from what I’ve read online.”

“Ok, lead the way, 33.”

We walked up to the historic, twelve-story Union Building, which was where Capitol Street came to a T-intersection with Kanawha Boulevard. The sidewalk was quite narrow. A sign just above the railing warned:

**CAUTION**

BOULEVARD  
TRAFFIC  
AT FOOT OF STEPS

And they weren't kidding, either. Motor vehicles whizzed by us – inches from our toes – at 45 MPH (72.4 km/h). *You sure don't want to rush out of this building.*

After 30 to 40 seconds, we got a white crosswalk signal and traversed Kanawha Boulevard. We soon came upon a pair of late-20-something Caucasian male hipsters, who were chatting away outside Sam's Uptown Cafe and Bar. As we passed them, I heard one of them ask the other: "Are you staying in Charlie West this weekend?" *Staying in Charlie West? Huh?*

While waiting for the crosswalk signal to turn at Virginia Street, I turned to look at my lovely pinay (Tagalog for a Filipina) wife. "Hon, can I borrow your phone for a second?"

"Sure," she said as she handed the Samsung Galaxy to me. "Need to look at Google Maps?"

"Uh, no. I just need to look up a phrase."

"What phrase would that be, Parkaar?"

"Charlie West. Oh, I just found it. It's a nickname for Charleston, West Virginia. I heard one of those dudes back there say it." *He's always eavesdropping.*

I handed the phone back to Monique. We proceeded northeastward on Capitol Street. The sidewalks now had more people on them. Employees were getting off work. A desk clock in a storefront window stated that it was 4:31. *Ah, only off by a minute.*

We soon came upon The Elite Gentlemen's Club. Monique then looked at me. "Is this a totoy [boobs in Cebuano] bar, Parkaar?"

"I think so, mahal."

"So, they have these places in every city in America, 33?"

"Yeah, pretty much. But, they're not as wild as the ones in Manila."

"And, how would you know, my darling kano?" [Filipino slang for American] *Foot-in-mouth disease strikes again.*

"Oh, friends have told me." *What a lame answer. But, I'll give him a pass for now.*



“Well, I’m hungry for some good pizza, Parkaar.”

Right after we passed a packed Adelphia Sports Bar & Grille, there it was: Pies and Pints. *Ah, yes – found it.*

We passed through the green façade. The place was bustling. Lively conversations abounded between pizza chomps and gulps of suds. *Looks like a kewl [sic] scene. / Wonder how long we’ll have to wait to be seated.*

Just a minute later, the blonde-haired hostess led us to a 2-top table that was adjacent to a 4-top table in the rear dining area, where a Caucasian dad, mom and two sons were finishing up and preparing to leave.

A brunette waitress soon came over to take our drink order. Monique just ordered a Sprite. I asked the waitress to surprise me with a good West Virginia dark beer. The Big Timber Porter that she brought back was exceptional. Five stars all the way from Elkins. *I hope that I can find this beer somewhere in Charlotte.*

We then ordered an onion pizza, as a biracial family of four sat down just three feet (one meter) from us. Due to the close proximity, conversations couldn’t be ignored. The light-skinned African American dad made a statement to his Caucasian wife: “We should be able to make it to Mocksville by nine o’clock.” *Mocksville?*

“Pardon me for asking, but are you guys going to Mocksville, North Carolina?” I queried the mid-30-something gent to my immediate right.

“Sure are,” the man said. “That’s where my wife’s family is from. We’ll have Christmas down there. We always stop in Charleston, because it’s about at the halfway mark.”

“I can remember going to a campground there in the ‘70s with my family. They had this pond with a water slide and diving platform in the middle. I forget the name of it.”

“I see.”

“So, where did you guys start out from?” I asked.

“Just south of Youngstown.”

“Browns fans?”

“No, Steelers.”

“Oh, that’s right; eastern Ohio is Steeler country.”

“Most, but not all of it. And, where are you guys from?”

“Charlotte.”

“A fast-growing city.”

“Fast-growing rents, too.”

He chuckled as the waitress placed the large pizza on the silver rack on our table. The *pie* was delicious. We devoured it, leaving nary a crumb.

Upon leaving, I told the man and his wife that I had a biracial son, and that they had two lovely daughters. The teenage girls blushed. We wished each other safe travels.

Monique and I then sauntered along Capitol Street to Washington Street, where we turned right and walked back to our hotel. *It feels fairly safe strolling this town at night.*

Once ensconced in our room, I checked the psecret psociety page on Facebook. Ernie the electronic earwig had posted a question about combination sports. Some of the replies from the agents were quite amusing. *Billiards using hand grenades. Ha! Agent 4 must have been toked-up.*

Monique got into bed and checked her Facebook on her smartphone. She sent a message to me (even though I was sitting in a chair only about ten feet – 3 meters – away):

When are you going to get in the bed? I'm cold! *Ah, the madness of this modern digital age.*

We fundled [*sic*] our grundles and then slept like babies through the foggy West Charlie night. After a courtesy continental breakfast, we were putting our shoe soles to the Charleston sidewalks once again. Today's first target: Charleston Town Center, a three-level shopping mall that was only seven blocks away. Monique demanded this one.

The mall was already packed at 10:10 AM on this Friday before Christmas. I followed Monique as she went shop to shop, diligently searching for refrigerator magnets (her favorite item to collect as of late). As we passed through the food court, I saw a dour-looking, 50-something, Caucasian guy sporting a Cleveland Browns cap. *Well, there's a true fan. I don't think Cleveland has won a single game this year.*

We struck out in the mall proper. However, a nearby corner shop had some very irreverent magnets for the fridge. We bought two: *Go Fuck Your Self* and one of Mister (Fred) Rogers flipping the middle finger.

The pangs of hunger hit as we arrived at the corner of Capitol & Lee. Monique wanted Italian again, and Graziano's was right there. Thus, in we went. She ordered a Stromboli and I got a slice of cheese pizza. It was good feed.

Our consumption slowed. I studied the restaurant's interior, wondering if any patron had ever uttered the phrase *Charlie West*. And then I mumbled such. *Did he say something?*

"Are you feeling ok, 33?" Monique asked between bites.

"Yes, feeling fine, mahal. And, how about you?"

"Feeling good now. I love this food. I have energy again."

Then I thought about the banner on the business next door (Delfine's Jewelry).

"Monique, did you notice the banner hanging on the shop next door?"

"No, Parkaar, I didn't. What did it say?"

"Long-term wife insurance. A clever pun for a jewelry store, huh?" I chuckled.

"The ring you got me is fine, 33. I love it!"

We boxed up what we couldn't finish and walked back to our hotel room. Rain moved in. We just stayed inside, ate leftovers, and watched the local news.

A male reporter was at Yeager Airport giving a delay update. There was only a lone traveler in camera range. The 40-ish Caucasian reporter then made a municipality-deprecating pronouncement: "Well, as you can plainly see, folks, our fair city is not a top holiday destination." *Ah, but we came and have enjoyed it. We could retire in Charlie West. Cheap rent.*

On the way out of Charleston on Saturday, Christmas Eve, we had a nice Thai lunch at Su Tei on MacCorkle Avenue SE. The green curry was piquantly divine. Monique's red curry wasn't overly sweet, she informed.

Before we left, I asked the late-30-something Asian waitress if Charlie West sounded familiar. She said that she didn't remember such a customer. And, I just left it at that. Of course, I left another *Gold* card under the tip. *Maybe she knows English well enough to read it. Or, maybe she gives it to her novel-loving best friend. Or, maybe I'm just steadily going nowhere. [sic] Floating down the chilly Kanawha River. Slowly losing buoyancy. Settling in the silt.*

**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



**Fries or Freeze** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | JANUARY 2017

**Fries or Freeze**

by Mike Bozart

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The wooden sign on Scenic Road (Virginia Route 94) read:

**Where the Trail begins ... FRIES**

I pulled off on the gravel turnout and immediately saw the 15-foot-tall (4.57 meters), stone, turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century, cotton mill dam on the New River.

“What’s the deal with this stop, Parkaar?” [my ailing alias] Monique, my Filipina wife, asked from the passenger seat of our 2005 Kia Rio. *I just know that he’s already recording.*

“Oh, I just wanted to look at this old dam again, Agent 32.”  
*Agent 32? Yep, he’s definitely recording.*

“Why, did someone go over it and die?”

“Not sure. Maybe when it was a waterfall.” [The dam was built at the site of Bartlett Falls.]

I stepped out of our warm, gray car, and into a cold, gray December day. There were patches of hardened snow here and there that crunched under foot. The temperature was below freezing, even at the four o’clock hour.

Monique then got out and walked over to the edge of the little plateau. She glanced down at the narrow pond that was adjacent to the river.

A brown sedan then slowly drove by. *I guess we are already on the radar.*

“What is the purpose of that dam, Parkaar? Was it built for flood control?”

“No, it was built for hydroelectric power for the textile plant. See that old building down there.” I pointed to a brick, four-story powerhouse.

Monique stared at the old building that had large, arched, bricked-in, top-floor window insets.

“The water flowed through it, 32, turning large turbines for electricity. The guy who got the mill up and running was from North Carolina. The town has his surname.”

“Oh, I thought that it was because this town had good French fries, 33.” She then had a hearty laugh.

I chuckled. “And, get this, the correct pronunciation is *freeze*.”

“How do you know this, 33?”

“I remember reading it in a pamphlet about the New River Trail.”

“Really?”

“Yep, yep, yep.”

“Oh, not the Malloy [a semi-fictional character who appears in numerous short stories and in the novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco*] shtick again. Give it a break, Parkaar.”

I just grinned and rubbed my right eye.

Monique then gazed at the wide river section below the dam. *This little town is in the middle of nowhere. Not sure if I could live here. Though, I'm sure my husband could.*

For some reason I recalled a day in the mid-1990s when I saw an elderly trout fisherman standing on a mid-stream rock, casting away. *Wonder if that guy is still alive. Maybe he died quietly in his sleep in 2009. Did he ever win a mid-level scratch-off prize? Did he once work in the mill? Was work hard to find after 1989? Did he have a rival for a certain local lass? Did he win out and marry her? Did she die tragically on the river? I doubt that he would have ever expected to surface in a short story.*

“What are you thinking about, 33? You seem awfully pensive over there.”

“Oh, just thinking about mortality, I guess.”

“In a fey way again, are you?”

“Well, no one lives forever, 32.” *Gosh! He can be so morbid.*

“Ok, enough of that, Parkaar. New topic: This famous trail – where does it start?”

“Less than a mile [1.6 km] from here, Monique. It's right beside the river. A great photo-op.”

“Ok, let's check it out.”

We got back in the car and motored into town. After passing the post office, I made a right onto Firehouse Drive. Soon we were entering a gravel parking lot for New River Trail State Park. Our vehicle was the only one. However, the sign said that you had to pay at all times (by cash into a lockbox), and for any amount of time. *So, no free parking here. Not even on this fatalistically forlorn day. We'll just stop for a minute.*

I parked the Kia so that we were facing the grayish green river. I kept the engine running.

“Well, want to snap a quick pic, Monique?”

“Sure, Parkaar.”

We got out of the car and she took a series of photos of the broad river.

“So, how new is this New River, 33?”

"It's actually a very old river, 32. Thus, the name."

"You Americans are crazy!" She laughed.

Then I heard a car entering the parking lot. It was a white sedan that slowly passed by us, looped around, and summarily exited. *Whew! Glad it wasn't a cop or someone from State Parks. I need a parking ticket like another hole in my head. [I have a shunt behind my right ear.]*

"Who was that, Parkaar?"

"Just some tourists from Ohio. I think that was our important portent: It's time to leave."

We got back in the car and rolled up to the trailhead. This jogged Monique's memory.

"Oh, yes! I remember this place. We rode our bikes here a few years ago. We got drinks at that red caboose. I rode 37.3 miles [60 km] that day! My personal best."

"Yeah, that was one fine ride. No doubt about it. We should do it again sometime. Maybe next spring."

We then exited the parking area and headed back towards the dam. As we went by the former mill site, I thought about the people who worked there over the decades. *It must have been devastating to this little hamlet when that mill closed. And the high school closed, too. But, this place sure has potential. So much natural beauty. If I had the money, I'd open an inn here. Oh, what am I thinking? What do I know about innkeeping? Nada. [Nothing in Spanish] In keeping with innkeeping. Words.*

Then Monique looked at me as we passed the dam and headed for Galax. "The water just keeps going down."

"Yeah, that's what it's paid to do, 32."

"Paid to do?! Have you lost your last marble, 33?"

Suddenly we heard the rumble of the right-side tires on the gravel shoulder. The car had drifted off the pavement.

"Ok, turn that digital audio recorder off now!" Monique demanded. "Start focusing on the matter at hand: safely driving us to a warm hotel in Galax."

I removed the thin recorder from my shirt pocket and switched it off. *Wonder if I got enough material for a short story. Seems a wee thin. There's always the fluff factor, though. And, the form factor. The fluffable, [sic] formable factor. The lost sinker.*

**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



**Gallivanting in Galax** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | JANUARY 2017

**Gallivanting in Galax**  
by Mike Bozart  
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The Main Street shadows were growing longer by the millisecond. A chilly dusk was starting to settle on the idyllic Blue Ridge town of Galax (VA, USA). It was Christmas Eve, and it was very quiet as far as the ear could see from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, south-facing Rodeway Inn balcony. *I wonder if there's any magic tonight in this little mountain town. Did I have that same thought back in 2012? [We stayed in Galax in October 2012 and a shorty story, 'Galax\_ Galaxy', was the result.]*

I then looked down and noticed that there were only two other vehicles in the parking lot. *Who stays in a hotel on Christmas Eve? People like us – that's who! [We had our family Christmas the previous Saturday.]* I had an internal chuckle that went external.

“What are you laughing about now, Agent 33?” Monique, my Filipina wife, asked as she came over to the metal railing. *Agent 33? Hmmm ... I wonder if Monique is using her new digital audio recorder.*

“Oh, just reveling in the invisible yet detectable, small-town holiday cheer, Agent 32.” *Ok, he knows that I'm recording.*

“You've been reveling in that jug of [Cabernet Sauvignon] wine for the past half-hour, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] I'm bored. Is there anywhere that we could go? Is there any place open?”

“Well, it is Christmas Eve, you know. It's going to be slim pickings, 32.” *Slim pickings? Must be some Americanism.*

Monique then did a Yelp search on her smartphone with the keywords: *best restaurants, Galax, VA*. She studied the first result. *Ah, this looks perfect!* “Hey bana, [husband in Cebuano] they have a craft brewery here that has good pizza. It got four and a half stars out of five. It's called Creek Bottom Brewing. It's on Meadow Street. Are you up for it?”

“Sure, sweetie. But, are they open? Do you have a phone number? I'll call them for you.”

Monique recited the phone number to me, and I called them on my not-that-smart phone. The guy who answered said that they were indeed open, but would be closing early. I told him to hold the door lock, as we were on the way.

“Agent 32, how far is that joint from here?”

“Let me check Google Maps, Parkaar. One minute.”

“No rush. Do you have the distance yet?” I then laughed.

“Just like your dad.” She chuckled as she looked at the route on her screen. “It’s only .7 miles [1.13 km] from here. Want to walk it, Agent 33?”

“Sure, Agent 32. That will increase the short-story potential.”

“And, it will be more adventurous. Life should be an adventure!”

“No argument here. Let’s go now, before they close.”

Soon we were walking south on the east side of North Main Street. After crossing Washington Street, we came upon a tall evergreen tree, perhaps a spruce or fir, decorated with large, solid-color ornaments. Monique demanded a video. My on-location report (now on Facebook) with hands under a couple of six-inch orbs: “Is it on? [Monique: “Yeah.”] It’s Christmas Eve, and we’re in Galax, Virginia, just by chance. And, look at this tree. This tree has got some big balls. Over here. Hey, you’ve ever heard of the dream of the blue balls?”

Bathroom humor, I know. I can do better. My apologies.

Next, we passed a most likely closed (but maybe open?) Macado’s, a sub shop. We kept walking, as Monique is not a sandwich fan. *Maybe next time for me.*

We then crossed Center Street. We walked past a series of closed boutiques and offices. *Next Generation. People put us duh-duh-down. [sic] Just because we get around. Things they do look awful cuh-cuh-cold. [sic] I hope I die before I get old. Well, too late for me. I’m ancient his-his-history. [sic] Talkin’ ‘bout the next gen-uh-uh-ration. [sic] Next generation, baby. / Wonder what nonsense he is thinking right now.*

We then passed The Galax Smokehouse and arrived at an intersection: Grayson Street. We turned left and soon passed the Visitor’s Center, which unfortunately, too, was closed. *I bet they have some nice brochures.*

Next, we crossed a little side street: Rex Lane. The nearly dark streets were completely deserted now. We continued our downward trek towards Chestnut Creek. I noticed the old Rex Theater on the right. *Wonder if ‘Casablanca’ played there. Maybe it’s not quite that old. But, that building sure has character. Hope the wrecking ball doesn’t get it.*

Then we came upon a sheet-metal-clad building that came up flush with the sidewalk. The most striking feature: a couple of exterior doors that opened about three feet (one meter) above the sidewalk. There were no steps. *Wow! That is one Paul Bunyan step up – or down. I don't think that would pass ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act).* I had a low-volume chuckle.

Monique noticed me studying the doors. “Where are the stairs, Parkaar?”

“They must have reeled them in for the holiday weekend.” *He's just spouting inanities for the recorder.*

“Why did I have to ask?” Monique asked with exasperation.

“I don't know right now, lovely Agent 32, but maybe it will come to me.” *Whatever!*

Monique just sighed. *Hope he doesn't drink too much at the microbrewery.*

We then crossed Depot Avenue and passed by the USPS (United States Post Office) building. A desolate Railroad Avenue followed. And then, we were walking under the Vaughan Bassett (a furniture plant) over-street connector. It was quite wide. *Wonder if they can run forklifts through it. Is there a conveyor belt in there? Wonder how the safety guy – or gal – manages.*

We stopped in the middle of the bridge over Chestnut Creek, a shallow brook, and looked downstream. *A New River volume feeder. Fries Junction. Yeah, that's the confluence.*

“Well, not much farther, Monique. The brewpub is probably right over there.” I pointed north with my right index finger. “Probably just .2 miles [322 meters] to go.”

“I bet that water is really cold. Do you think it is 33 degrees, [Fahrenheit; 0.56° Celsius] 33?”

“Not that cold, 32. It's probably in the 40s. [Fahrenheit; 4.44° to 9.99° Celsius] But, still way too cold to wade.” *To wade?!*

“Yellow card to Parkaar. One more ridiculous comment and I turn the recorder off.” *Oh, no!*

“That's not much leeway, dearest ref.”

Monique didn't respond. Soon we were making a rounded inside-corner left onto North Meadow Street. The galvanized steel guardrail on our immediate left ended, and then the sidewalk did, too. *Glad that Monique didn't wear high heels. She would be hating it right now.*

We marched on the grass next to the road, passing various industrial businesses. Then we passed a lone residence and arrived at East View Street. We safely crossed Meadow Street, waving a car by. And then as we crossed View Street, I looked back southwestward across the creek. *If there were a pedestrian bridge – or even a low-water weir – connecting Webster and View, it would cut the distance nearly in half, I bet. Would also be a good bike link. / Lord knows what he's thinking of now. Won't even ask.*

We immediately saw the brown wooden sign in front of the PRONETS Building:

### **Creek Bottom Brews – Craft Beer Store & Tasting Room**

We noticed several cars in the gravel parking lot and made our way to the front door of their building, which was an annex of the PRONETS Building. I pulled on the door handle. It opened. *Yee-hee! They're not closed. I'm so hungry for some pizza / Yey! We made it in time. Can't wait to taste their beer.*

We walked in and stopped near the register. A middle-aged Caucasian couple, who were seated near the door, had just finished eating, and were getting up to leave. They chatted with the staff as they made their exit. *Must be locals. They seem to know each other.*

We were quickly seated in the back area by a late-20-something, brown-haired, bearded, white dude. *Prerequisite no. 1 for being a male craft brewer: Full beard.*

"Thanks for staying open for us," I said to him.

"Ah, that was you," he said. "No problem, man. You guys got in under the wire." He then headed back to the kitchen.

I then studied the walls, which were lined with tall shelves of assorted craft beers, while waiting for our waiter. *This was the perfect stop tonight.*

A blonde-haired Caucasian lady of about 25 years soon took our pizza order. When she asked me what I would like to

drink, I told her to surprise me with something dark. The pint of Porter Wagoneer that she brought back really hit the spot. *Nice chocolate aroma. Great brewski. [sic]*

Monique sipped on a Sprite as we waited for the pizza. We could see the stone oven from where we were seated. *Wow! A real stone oven. / This pizza should be good.*

The pizza landed twelve minutes later. It was delicious. The dark beer complimented it perfectly.

“We picked a good place, Parkaar,” Monique said as she finished off the next-to-penultimate onion slice.

“We really did, Agent 32. We could have done a lot worse.”

“We could have been eating at a convenient store tonight, Agent 33.” *So true.*

“No doubt, 32.”

Then the waitress walked up. “Is everything ok?”

“Yes, everything is fine,” I replied as Monique nodded.

“Would you like another beer, sir?”

“How much time do we have?” I asked, fearing that closing time was fast approaching.

“Oh, probably twenty minutes. We won’t run you out.” *That’s very nice of them.*

“In that case, sure!”

“Where are you all from?” the short waitress then asked.

“Charlotte,” Monique quickly stated.

“And what brings you up here on Christmas Eve?”

“Our health,” Monique replied. *Ah, Casablanca. I’ll play along, too.*

“We came to Galax for the waters,” I added.

“But, neither of you are drinking our fine mountain water,” the waitress stated. *I wonder if she got the Casablanca reference. Her reply is ambiguous. The mysteries in this life.*

Seventeen minutes later we had consumed all the food and beverages. I paid the bill with our credit-union debit card.

And, par for the course, I left a *Gold* card (a coupon for a free e-copy of my 2013 novel, *Gold, a summer story*) under the tip. *He sure is dispensing those cards rather quickly.*

However, we didn't get out the door before the waitress pulled her tip – and saw the card.

“Didn't you write a science-fiction short story that was based in Galax several years ago?” she asked me as she approached us.

“I did. I've learned to stay away from that genre. It certainly wasn't my best. It has a one-star rating at last check.”

“Oh, I was fine with the sci-fi theme. What distressed me was the thoughts of my fellow townsfolk. It was quite negative and dark.”

“Sorry about that,” I said. “The next short story about Galax will be much more positive. I like this town.”

“Ok, I'll look forward to reading it,” she said. “Goodnight and Merry Christmas.”

“Likewise,” Monique and I replied in unison.

We decided to perambulate back, so as to form a rectangular loop, since the northern return route was approximately equal to the distance of the way we had come. Also, I wanted to include a few more sights and site-specific thoughts in the future short story. (The one that you are reading now.)

Monique and I walked north-northwestward on North Meadow Street. We cut through the CVS Pharmacy parking lot to arrive on East Stuart Drive (US 58/221). It was dark now.

Traffic was sporadic on the four-lane highway as we walked over Chestnut Creek on a narrow sidewalk. We hurried so that we would be off of the bridge before a large, whole-right-lane-wide truck got there. We made it by a step. *Whew!*

As we crossed T. George Vaughan, Jr. Road, I looked over to the right and saw an old red NW (Norfolk and Western) caboose. It was at the beginning of the Galax branch of the New River Trail. I pointed to it.

“Monique, that’s where our rail-trail bicycling adventure started 50 months ago.” *Fifty months? Why doesn’t he just say ‘a little over four years ago’? Because the recorder is on.*

“Yes, it was a perfect fall day, Parkaar.”

“Indeed it was, 32.”

“I wonder if anyone is on that trail right now, 33.”

“Well, there are some 57 miles [91.7 km] of fine crushed stone. There’s probably some lost soul out there somewhere. Maybe between Draper and Pulaski.”

“Why would you guess there, 33?” Monique asked as we crossed Madison Street.

“Just a hunched-over hunch, 32.” *What?!*

At the corner of East Stuart and North Main was a gasoline station that had been converted into a community church (Hearts United). The sign on the brick wall said that they accepted everyone – Muslims, Latinos, Asians, African Americans, and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) folks. *Pretty impressive for a small town in Appalachia. Wonder if they get harassed. / I just know that my bana likes this.*

We turned left. Two blocks later, we were crossing East Webster Street. Monique then pointed to a wooden sign:

### **Galax Police Department**

She snapped a pic of me standing next to it (posted on Facebook). *It’s reassuring that the police station is right next to us. / Glad that we’re on foot. I’m probably under 0.08, [blood-alcohol concentration] but I know that I have alcohol on my breath. Smart move leaving the car parked.*

Seventy-seven feet (25.67 meters) later, we were climbing the exterior steps to our room. A charming South Asian family of four passed us. *I wonder if they are related to the owner. [who appeared to be of Indian descent] / Glad we’re not the only ones here tonight. That would be creepy.*

We rounded the balcony corner and were safely back at our hotel room. I unlocked and opened the door. Monique immediately flopped down on the queen-size bed. She was exhausted.

I then told her that I was going to take a few nighttime pics. I closed the door and walked to the eastern end of the second-floor exterior corridor and noticed the sign on the adjacent building:

### **Midtown Apartments**

A make-your-own-message wall sign stated that all utilities were included. *Nice views. Cheap rent. This would be it.*

And then a 60-ish white guy in a green army jacket staggered out of the shadows below. He appeared to be extremely impaired.

“Merry Christmas!” I yelled down to him.

“What’s sooooo [sic] merry about it?” he slurred out as he wiped his disheveled gray beard with his right cuff.

“Well, we’re both alive in America. We’ve still got a chance.”

“I aint got no chances left. And, you don’t, either, pal. It’s over. We lost.” *We? Such an incorrigibly optimistic chap.*

“Ok, well, enjoy this nice night anyway.”

“What’s so nice about it?!” he shouted. *Bitter always?*

I didn’t reply. I just strided back to our room. While unlocking the door, I noticed a sign to my left:

### **Knights Inn 4 Blocks →**

I looked up the hill. *Wonder if anyone ever found that note.*

Once inside, I sat on the side of the bed and began to take off my heavy, brown, steel-toe hiking shoes.

Monique then rolled over. “Did you encounter anything interesting?” she sleepily asked.

“Just an impromptu story-closer, 32.”

“I’ll transcribe the recording for you tomorrow.”

“Salamat, ang akong matam-is nga asawa. [‘Thanks, my sweet wife’ in Cebuano] Very much appreciated. I think we’ve got another story here.”

Monique quickly fell back asleep. Twelve minutes later, I heard a man stomping past our door. *Wonder if that’s the homeless-appearing guy.*



Then all was quiet for the rest of the waking night. After the weather segment on the 10 o'clock local news (out of Roanoke), I turned the TV off. Sleep crashed down on my consciousness within minutes.

Just before dawn, an intense dream took hold. The sound of the microwave door closing awoke me. Monique looked at my shocked face. I immediately felt under the pillows. But, nothing was there.

"Wrong story, Parkaar," Monique stated.

We laughed.