

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



A Winter Hike by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | AUG 2016

It was back in January of 2000 when I lived alone on High Peak Mountain (near Etowah, NC, USA) that some Caucasian American friends from Charlotte (Frank von Peck, Agent 107, and Burke Braun, Agent 2) came up for a cool-air waterfall hike. I'm not sure of the exact Saturday, but there was still some snow on the ground in the shady spots. The high temperature was forecast to be 43° (Fahrenheit; 6° Celsius) in the Brevard area under mostly cloudy skies. I thought: *Ah, perfect hiking weather. Should be fun. No bugs. No sweat.*

We had a breakfast bowl (not Cheerios) and some coffee in the living room. A few minutes later, perhaps around 9:30 AM, we were joined by my zany, white, long-dirty-blond-haired, former Floridian, up-street neighbor Kelvin (refused to take an agent number; is suspicious of all numerical identification).

"We should do DuPont [State Forest] today, dudes," Kelvin suggested emphatically. *Do-do pont.*

"From the bridge?" I asked. *Huh?*

"From the bridge?" Kelvin repeated, looking puzzled.

"That's what DuPont means in French," I said. *Oh, no, he's on with the French translations already.*

"Get out of here, old man," Kelvin retorted.

"Hey, you're older than me," I barked back. (I was 35 at the time; Kelvin was 43, I believe; Burke was just shy of 36; Frank was 34.)

We got our bodies and minds satiated and then piled into my white Plymouth Voyager minivan. Burke, sitting shotgun, put in an early '70s art-rock cassette tape as we began to ease down the steep, gravel, switchbacking road.

When we arrived at the valley plateau (.62 miles – 1 km – from my driveway), the two Charlotteans were noticeably shocked by the ratty old trailers and assorted makeshift housing.

“Man, I don’t know how you ever bought that house up there, Tryke,” [my nickname and art-name] a reddish-brown-bearded Burke said. “I would have turned around as soon as I saw this.”

“I hear ya, Burke. I was sitting in Beanstreets [now out of business, but the focus of a short story with the same name] in downtown Asheville in late October of '97, when I saw the house advertised in *IWANNA* (a free buy-and-sell weekly). It was just your basic three-line text ad. I wasn’t really considering the Etowah area, but a two-bedroom house on a mountain for only \$39,900 ensnared my curiosity. I thought, ‘oh, let’s at least check it out’ – which I certainly did that evening.”

“The first time you came up here it was dark?” Frank asked from the backseat, sounding shocked.

“It wasn’t pitch-dark, Frank,” I replied. “Though, it was advanced twilight. I had called the homeowner before I left Asheville. He said that the house was just a smidgen under 1.1 miles [1.77 km] from the paved road.” *Smidgen?*

“Did he really say the word *smidgen*, Tryke?” Burke asked.

“He did, Burke. You know me; I remember such trivial, non-revenue-generating things.” *What?*

At the bent, shotgun-blasted STOP sign, I turned left and we bounded onto the asphalt road (Pleasant Grove Church Road). Everyone was happy to finally be done with the bumpy, severely rutted, cratered High Peak Road. *Jesus Christ! That is the road from hell!*

Just 500 feet (152 meters) later, we were at another STOP sign that only had one bullet hole in it. I turned left again. We were now on Pleasant Grove Road, which paralleled the sinuous French Broad River. At some point the road changed names and became Talley Road.

Everyone seemed to be lost in Burke’s musical selections. A cut from Gentle Giant was playing as we rolled up to the STOP sign at Crab Creek Road. *School days together, why do they change?*

“Are we there yet?” Frank mocked from the backseat.

I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw his dark brown hair flanking his black shades. “Only six miles [9.66 km] to go, Peckmeister.” [one of Frank’s nicknames]

With that answer, Frank fired up another bowl. *Oh, jeez.*

“We’ve made three consecutive left turns, Tryke,” Burke then said. “Are we going in a circle around the mountain?”

“A semicircle,” I said. “Then we’ll break away to the west.”

Burke just shook his head. *He’s already cooked.*

Kelvin, who had been mute – possibly from being hungover – finally spoke up. “We’re now on Crab Creek Road, boys. You know why they call it Crab Creek Road?”

“No idea,” I replied.

Neither Burke nor Frank offered up an answer.

“Time’s up!” Kelvin blasted. “They call it Crab Creek Road because it runs next to Crab Creek.”

“Booooooo,” I muttered.

“So, the lame comedy hour has already started,” Burke commented.

“Let me out now,” Frank demanded.

Kelvin then tacked on his hardy-har-har laugh.

Soon I was turning right onto DuPont Road (which becomes Staton Road). “It’s the homestretch now, guys.” No reply.

Three miles (4.83 km) further, I turned right into the Hooker Falls Access Area parking lot. There were only two other vehicles. I parked near the river, away from the pair of SUVs.

“Well, we’re here, guys,” I announced. “Get ready for eight grueling hours of hiking.”

“Fuck that!” Frank retorted.

“Calm down,” I replied. “I’m just kidding. We can take in several waterfalls and be back here in under three hours.”

“Ok, what’s the first waterfall?” Frank asked.

“Hooker Falls, dude,” Kelvin answered for me. “Did you not see that brown sign?” No response from Frank.

“Hooker Falls?” Burke queried. “I guess you have a joke for that, Kelvin.”

“Not really,” Kelvin softly said. “A previous landowner’s last name was Hooker.”

“Ah, but we all know what Mrs. Hooker did for extra income,” Frank said as he took another toke from his chrome pipe. *What in the world?*

“Ok, enough!” I quipped. “Let’s get out of this smoky van before the cops catch a whiff. It’s time to start hiking.”

With that we all disembarked and began marching towards Hooker Falls. The trail was only .31 miles (.5 km) long. We were soon looking at a corner-ledge waterfall. The drop was only 12 feet (3.66 meters). There was some ice on the edges of the plunge pool.

“That’s your basic Hooker Falls on a winter day,” I announced to the other three. *Basic?*

“Basic?” Burke questioned. “Why, is the bedrock alkaline?” *Huh? / What are they talking about?*

“You said *bedrock*, dude,” Kelvin stated and then began to guffaw in his most unique way.

I then heard some hikers coming towards us. “Hey, reel it in, guys. We’re not alone.”

The hikers, an older Caucasian couple with a Chinese girl accosted us. *I bet they adopted her.* We said our polite hellos and were soon heading back.

At a trail intersection near the parking lot, we stopped to read the signs.

“Next up is Triple Falls,” I said. “It’s less than a half-mile [.8 km] from here.”

“It’s not straight uphill is it?” Frank asked, seeming very concerned.

“Just the last 1,000 feet,” [305 meters] Kelvin replied.

“What?!” Frank spouted, dreading a steep ascent.

“It’s not that bad, Frank,” I said. “Kelvin and I did this hike last year. A little climbing, but even your truncated lungs can make it, Captain Stacks.” [another one of Frank’s nicknames as he was a chronic smoker] *Truncated? What the fuck!*

Frank consented. Soon we were passing under the road next to the cold stream (Little River). We noticed tiny icicles hanging from the boulders in the stream.

“I’d hate to fall into that creek,” Burke remarked.

“It would be a cold bath that you wouldn’t forget,” I added.

“Or remember,” Kelvin concluded. *Huh?*

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’d be dead in no time from hypothermia,” Kelvin stated.

“Nothing to remember.”

“Kelvin, are you an atheist?” Frank asked.

“I’m just a realist,” Kelvin replied.

We continued on the rocks-and-sand trail to the base of the impressive Triple Falls. Like its name implies, the waterfall was a series of three main drops that totaled 122 feet (37.19 meters).

The spray was cold on my face. I moved over to the right side of the plunge pool, out of the line of fire.

“Afraid of a little chilly mist?” Kelvin asked me. “It’ll wake your sleepy ass up!”

“I’m sure it will, Kelvin,” I said. “I just don’t want to be stoned, cold and wet.”

“Hey, two out of three aint bad,” Kelvin said without missing the cue for a pun on the famous Meatloaf song. *He sure loves that gag.*

We each settled on a dry boulder, looking up at the mighty waterfall, lost in our inebriation. Frank packed another bowl and we passed it back and forth. *Man, I am really zonked now. / How does Frank do it? / These guys are toasted. / Glad I don’t have anything to do today.*

Then after maybe ten speechless minutes, Frank shouted at me: “There’s a bear behind you!” *Oh, shit!*

I spun my head around. All I saw was a patch of drooping rhododendron (typical in cold weather). “You got me again with that one,” I confessed to Frank.

“You fall for it every time,” Frank said.

“You should have seen the look on your face, Mike,” Kelvin said. “You bought it, hook, line and sinker.” *He’s right.*

“Yeah, I guess I am pretty gullible in this hyper-suggestable state of mind,” I said. *What did he just say?*

Frank then stood up, feeling a rush of newfound energy. “Let’s do one more waterfall!” he exclaimed. “I’m game for it now. I’m going to hike your asses under the table.” *His energy level is inversely proportional to the amount of weed that he smokes. No, wait; that would be for me, Burke and Kelvin. With him it is directly proportional. I could take a nap right now. How does he do it? / Time to hike again? Already? / Did I leave the car battery charger on? Hope it shuts off automatically. Last time it didn’t.*

We marched on. The trail stayed beside the river for a quarter-mile (402 meters), then it broke into the woods and began to rise. *Hope there are no wolves around. / Hope there are no rednecks up to no good. / Hope I can make this climb. / Hope no one gets hurt. A twisted ankle would suck.*

After about ten minutes we had scaled the ridge. With no leaves being on the deciduous trees, we were able to see High Falls, a forty-yard-long (36.58 meters) slanted chunk of granite, as soon as we heard it. A few minutes later we were nearing the base.

“Hey, look at that!” Frank exclaimed. “There’s a covered bridge up there.”

“Wow,” Burke uttered.

“Yeah, this area was going to be the focus of a high-end, gated, residential development,” I said. “I think the State got an injunction to stop it. It’s all tied-up in court now.” [Governor Jim Hunt would invoke eminent domain in October of 2000 to protect this area from private development and restricted access.]

“No one should own these waterfalls; they should be public,” Kelvin opined.

“I agree, Kelvin,” Burke said.

“Me, too,” I added.

“Are those balloons up there?” Frank asked as he studied the covered bridge with his right hand shielding a ray of sun.

“Not sure,” I said.

“Let’s go up and see,” Kelvin suggested.

“More climbing?” Frank asked, now appearing low on energy. Let me get recharged first.” *Again?*

Frank puffed another bowl with Burke. Kelvin and I just gulped down some Gatorade. *I am still high as a kite. No need for any more. / Man, that Frank guy loves to bake it. / I’m running low. Need to conserve for the trip back to Charlotte. / He’s too generous with his weed. I owe him.*

After an eight-minute break, we were hiking again. The clouds had moved back in, obscuring the sun. A brisk breeze whispered down the ravine.

Once at the top of High Falls, we walked onto the newly constructed covered bridge. The colored orbs that we saw from below were indeed balloons. We each took one down from the posts. They were ordinary air balloons – not helium.

“Hey, let’s let them all go over the falls and see which ones survive,” I offered for entertainment.

“Sure, dude,” Frank said. “This purple balloon will be the sole survivor. You can give me the gold medal now.”

“We’ll see about that, Frank,” Burke countered. “This greenie can’t be touched.”

“Don’t underestimate this over-plump blueberry,” Kelvin contended.

“My steroidal cherry will be ‘Le championne de la chute d’eau’,” [The champion of the waterfall] I proclaimed. *Oh, no – not French! / What? / Huh?*

We walked back down to the top of High Falls and released the quartet of balloons in the main channel. They all went over and down the dangerously deceptive cascade.

Then we retreated to the base of High Falls to survey the fate of the balloons. Surprisingly, three of the four had survived the falls, and were just floating around in the plunge pool like rubber duckies. However, Frank’s purple balloon was nowhere to be seen.

It was a pensive walk back to the van.

Note: Frank would be the first one to leave this mortal realm, departing on January 6, 2013.