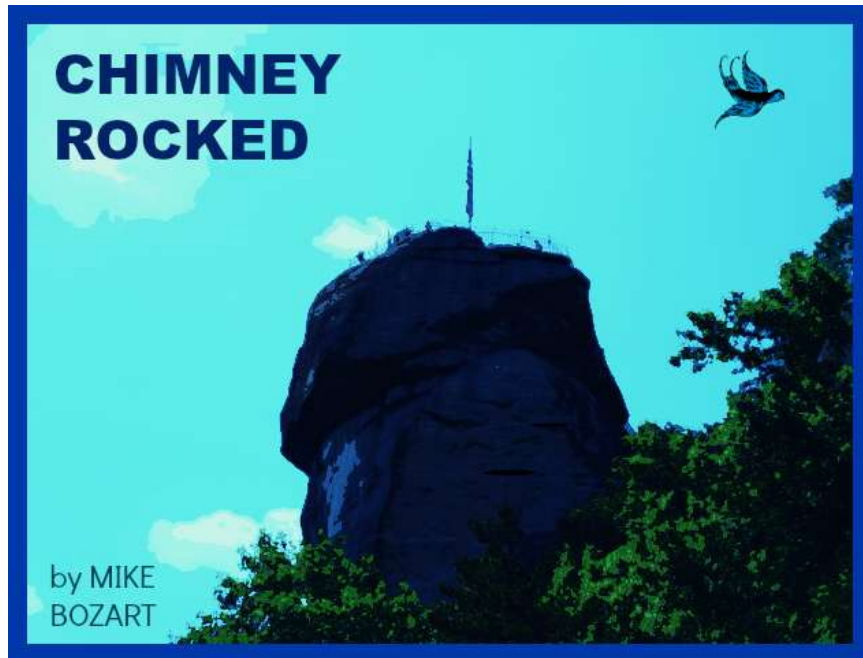


another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Chimney Rocked by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | APR 2016

We (my Filipina wife, Monique, Agent 32; my twelve-year-old Amerasian son, Agent 666, who would later drop a 6 and become Agent 66; Angeline, an 81-year-old Caucasian widow; Kelvin, a 60-year-old Caucasian truck driver and general screwball; and I, Agent 33) finished our Sunday brunch at Fireside Restaurant on Sugarloaf Road in Hendersonville (NC, USA). We walked up to the cash register and nonchalantly paid our bills. Once out on the asphalt parking lot, we discussed plans for this splendidly crisp April day.

“I think that we will do Chimney Rock today,” I said to Angeline and Kelvin. (Angeline and Kelvin both appear in the previous short story *High Peak Revisited*.) “Want to join us?”

“Michael, you know that I can’t do that kind of strenuous walking!” Angeline exclaimed. *She sure loves to call me Michael.*

“But, it has an elevator, Angeline,” I said.

“The elevator is not working,” Kelvin interjected. “I checked their website. It will cost the three of you \$32. They’re giving a discount because of the elevator being down.”

“That’s kewl,” [*sic*] I replied. “You don’t want to go with us?”

“No, I think I’ll pass, too,” Kelvin answered.

And with that we said our farewells. Angeline and Kelvin headed back to High Peak Mountain, about 15 miles (24 km) to the west. We (Agents 32, 666 and 33) headed east on US 64. *Ah, such perfect weather.*

“Dad, how far away is Chimney Rock?”

“Only 16 miles, [25.75 km] son.”

“Have you ever been there before?” Monique asked.

“One time, back in 1989 with Frank [the late, great Agent 107] and a guy we called ‘the mighty Hev’. [at last check in Arizona] But, it didn’t end well, Agent 32.” *Agent 32? Ok, it’s open-mic[rophone] time.*

“What do you mean, Agent 33?” Monique asked, suddenly very curious to know more.

“Well, we didn’t enter the park the proper way. To avoid paying the hefty-to-us-at-the-time entrance fee, we hiked in via the waterfall.” *Via the waterfall? / WTF did dad do?!*

“Dad, you guys hiked up that waterfall?! [He had seen pictures of Hickory Nut Falls in brochures.] That’s totally insane, dad! How in the world did you guys do it? Did you use ropes and hooks?”

“Not the 400-foot vertical drop, son. We just boulder-hopped up the Falls Creek cascades from the Broad River to the base of the main waterfall.” *Dad sure was adventurous in his younger days. / I bet they were high or drunk. Probably both.*

“Dad, it’s 404 feet – not 400.” *He’s right.*

“Ah, you remembered that palindromic number. Good job, son.” *What? / Palindromic number? Huh?*

“Well, what went wrong up there?” Monique asked.

“The sun suddenly dropped below the ridge,” I began. “Therefore, we started to rush our descent, as we didn’t want to be hiking on the mountain in the pitch-dark. Frank then stopped to survey a very steep deer trail, but then passed on it, thinking it was too risky. I then went over to it and said: ‘Let’s not be wussies. [sic] We can do this!’ Famous last words. I grabbed a hold of a tree branch to steady my initial drop-down. The limb was dead and immediately snapped off the tree trunk. I then slid feet-first in near-free-fall down a 70-degree, leaf-covered slope, coming to a sudden stop when my left shoe slammed hard into a granite outcrop. When I looked at my left foot, it was flopped over 90 degrees. I had broken my ankle in seven places.” *Ouch! / Wow!*

“How did you get out of there?” my son asked.

“Frank and Hev helped me hobble down through the woods to an old logging road,” I said. “Then Frank ran down to his pickup truck and drove it up to where Hev and I were.”

“How bad did your ankle hurt?” Monique then asked.

“Surprisingly, it wasn’t excruciating,” I replied. “On a scale of zero to ten, about a seven. I was able to make it all the way back to Charlotte, [a 1:45 drive] where I got medical attention in the old Mercy Hospital’s Emergency Room.” *What a ridiculous misadventure. / I’m glad that we are going in the proper way. This place sounds dangerous.*

I slowed down as we crossed the boulder-strewn Broad River and approached the Bat Cave T-intersection. At the stop sign, I turned right onto US 74-A/US 64. We followed the brook downstream, southeasterly, for a few miles (about

5 km), finally arriving at the Chimney Rock State Park entrance on the right. *Ah, we're already here. / So, this is where it will begin. / I don't see the Chimney Rock.*

We entered the park and began to slowly climb the base of the mountain on the old, narrow, asphalt-missing-in-spots road. Three fourths of a mile (1.2 km) later, we were paying our entrance fee at the gatehouse. *Wow, Kelvin was right: \$32 exactly for the three of us.*

The park employees directed us to an overflow parking lot. (The upper lot was apparently full.) We then exited the car and walked over to a bus stop. Three minutes later we were boarding a reconditioned school bus.

Up we climbed, switchback by switchback. Inside the fourth (or fifth?) hairpin turn was a house.

"Imagine if that were our house," I offered.

"No thanks, dad. No yard and traffic going right by the windows."

We did a couple of more switchbacks and then arrived at the upper bus stop. We jumped off and began walking towards the upper parking lot (which indeed was completely full). Then the steps started.

We marched up the twisting wooden stairway, flight by flight, sigh by sigh. After climbing maybe 80 feet (24.4 meters), we took a break at an unoccupied landing.

"How much farther?" my wife asked between gasps.

“Just look up there, mahal,” [love in Tagalog] I replied.

Monique and my son looked up the side of the official Chimney Rock, a 315-foot (96 meters), cylindrical, gray, granite monolith. There was a large American flag waving on top. We could see hordes of people looking out over the black metal railing. *Never trust a railing. [reference short story ‘The Balcony’] / I’d hate to fall from there. Certain death. / Wow! We still have a lot more stairclimbing to do.*

“We might be a fourth of the way there,” I said.

“Gosh, let me catch my breath,” Monique said. “I didn’t know that there were so many steps.” *I should have worn athletic shoes. These boots are killing me.*

Soon we were mashing the wooden steps once again. I heard German and Japanese as we ascended the galvanized-steel-supported stairway. *They must be advertising this internationally. Looks like they redid this stairway fairly recently. Nice concrete footings. Completely rock solid.*

Four minutes later we were done climbing the steps on the Outcroppings Trail. Now there was just a narrow walkway to cross to get to the Chimney Rock. I walked ahead twenty feet and then looked back. Agent 666 was still on the bench. Monique was talking to him.

She then looked up at me. “He doesn’t want to go up there,” Agent 32 shouted. “He’s afraid.”

“C’mon, son! It’s not that bad. There are railings all the way around. If you don’t touch the flagpole, you don’t get the checkmark.” *What?!*

He then got up and started walking towards me beside Monique. They crossed the slanted bridge together. Once across, my son immediately walked to the flagpole and thumped it. <ding>

“Ok, I heard that,” I said. “Credit to Agent 666.”

Some tourists then looked at us. *Maybe I shouldn’t have said ‘Agent 666’. Someone will probably report us for being devil worshippers. Ha-ha.*

“Has anyone ever fallen off here, Agent 33?” Monique asked me as she looked down, backing away from the railing. *Good, she called me Agent 33. I can hear the mental gears grinding up here.*

“I’m not sure, Agent 32,” I answered, while looking eastward, studying the shoreline of Lake Lure. “Maybe a Native American in the distant past. However, I did read about a toddler falling off the Skyline Trail in 2008.” *Another agent number for the tourists to process. / He’s enjoying the agent-number nonsense, I can tell. / Oh, boy ... dad with the agent numbers again.*

“What trail is that?” my son then asked.

“It’s the one over there, triple six,” I said while pointing to another series of steps that went higher up the mountain.

“Let’s not go over there then,” my son said.

“How did it happen?” Monique asked. “Did the child climb over the fence?”

“No, from what I remember, Agent 32, the two-year-old Hispanic boy slipped through a gap between the railing and a rock outcrop, or maybe it was the face of the mountain.”

“I noticed a face on the Chimney Rock, [study front cover] and the face was not happy,” my son quickly added.

“That’s so terribly horrific!” Monique exclaimed. “The mother must have been traumatized for life.”

“I imagine so,” I said. “Not sure if I could go on.”

My son then gazed across the Broad River Valley to another ridge. “What is that mountain called, Agent 33?” *Wow, my son is even playing along now, hip to psecret psociety mode.*

“That’s Rumbling Bald, 6-6-6. It got its name due to recurring low-magnitude earthquakes – little rumbler [sic], or temblors would be the correct word – and its treeless, curved-rock pate.” *Pate?*

“Earthquakes in North Carolina?” Monique then asked, somewhat shocked.

“Yes, small earthquakes occur in these mountains from time to time. I felt a little shaker [magnitude 3.7] when I lived in Asheville. I believe that it was in the summer of 2005. [August 24] The epicenter was in Hot Springs, about 30 miles [48 km] northwest of our house behind City Hall.”

“Well, I’d hate for an earthquake to hit right now,” Agent 32 said, now looking scared of the height.

“Yeah, if it was over a magnitude 5, it might topple this rock,” I said. “We would then ride Chimney Rock to our deaths.”
Ride chimney cock. I’m glad that he can’t detect my thoughts. / What a frightening scenario, dad. Thanks for scaring me! / That would be the last ride for sure. Cue up the Todd Rundgren tune. ‘It’s the last –’ <thud>

“I think I’m ready to go back down,” my son then said.

On our descent we checked out adjacent outcrops and features, signed as *Opera Box, Subway* and *Grotto*.

When we reached the intersection with the Hickory Nut Falls Trail, my son stopped to read the sign.

“Let’s go to the waterfall!” he exclaimed.

“Are you ok with that, Agent 32?” I asked.

“How far is it?” she asked. *It had better be under a mile. [1.6 km]*

“It’s under a mile,” I replied. *Is he reading my mind again?*

“How far under a mile?” Monique asked. “It’s not .99 miles is it?” *Huh?*

“No, it’s only .55 miles,” [.89 km] I said. “Remember your kilometer-long [.62 miles] walk to grade school in Lazi? [Siquijor, Philippines] Well, it’s even shorter than that. And,

best of all, there are no steps! It's an easy hike. Not much elevation change."

"Ok, sure, let's do it," Monique relented.

We then walked the trail that was at the base of the rock-face cliffs, but still way above the Broad River. In just sixteen minutes we neared the towering waterfall's plunge pool.

I stopped. The steep slope to the right looked familiar, even after 27 years. *This is it – where I went for that ankle-shattering slide. It looks like I flew off a short cliff on the way down. I could have easily died. What an über-foolish move that was. I got away with one for sure.*

"Do you see a bear down there, dad?" *What is he looking at?*

"No, son. No bear." *A fox?*

"Well, what do you see?" Agent 666 demanded.

"I see where I went on that ominous slide, son. My mishap all started on this exact spot, on Saturday, March 11, 1989." *Dad remembers the exact date?*

"You thought that you could hike down this?!" Monique exclaimed. *How crazy! / Did dad have a death wish?*

"I can't believe that I attempted it now," I continued. "However, it was dusk at the time. I couldn't see the slope as well as now." *I remember being in freefall for a second or two. That's probably when I was sent airborne off that cliff down there. I'm lucky that I landed on my back and not on my head. Real lucky.*

We then checked out the base of the waterfall and took some pics. Our eyes drifted up the granite cliff. A strange bird was riding a thermal. (See cover.)

“It would suck hugely if a large rock suddenly fell off the edge of that cliff,” my son then said. *Suck hugely? The kids have their own lingo. I guess we did, too. / Absolutely suck!*

“Even a pebble would do major damage from that height, Agent 666,” I said. “It might go right through a skull.” *Another lovely thought from dad. Gosh! / He always has to bring up some grim fatal scenario.*

“Ok, I’m ready to head back,” Monique then announced.

We retraced our steps back to the intersection with the Outcroppings Trail with not so much as a single utterance. There, an idea came into my head as I looked at the steps. *We can stay on this trail to avoid that climb.*

“Guys, we don’t have to go back that way. We can take this trail to the switchback near the bus stop.”

“Ok, sounds good, 33,” Monique said. *I sure hope that he is right. / Dad had better not make this walk longer.*

In just a few minutes we arrived at a switchback. The white shuttle bus was descending, approaching the tight turn.

Monique stepped up to the edge of the pavement and began hailing the bus. *I doubt he’ll stop here. He’s probably not allowed to stop in between. / What is she doing?*

To my amazement, the bus stopped. The driver waved us across the street.

Monique clapped her hands and yelled, “Yey!”

We boarded the bus and thanked the late-20-something, bearded, hipsteresque, [sic] Caucasian driver.

The bus then wound its way back down the mountain as each of us sat in our own seats, lost in assorted recollections of the day. *I'm glad that dad finally brought me here. That waterfall was awesome. But, the Chimney Rock area was scary. Couldn't imagine falling from there. That poor little boy. / That lower Four Seasons Trail looked intriguing. Maybe next time we can do that one on a cool fall day. / Nice hiking trails here, but I sure wore the wrong shoes. Feels great to give my sore feet a rest.*

As the bus pulled into the lower stop, I saw that strange bird again. It cut a loop-de-loop ... and then ... it dove ... and disappeared ... into a cirrus cloud.