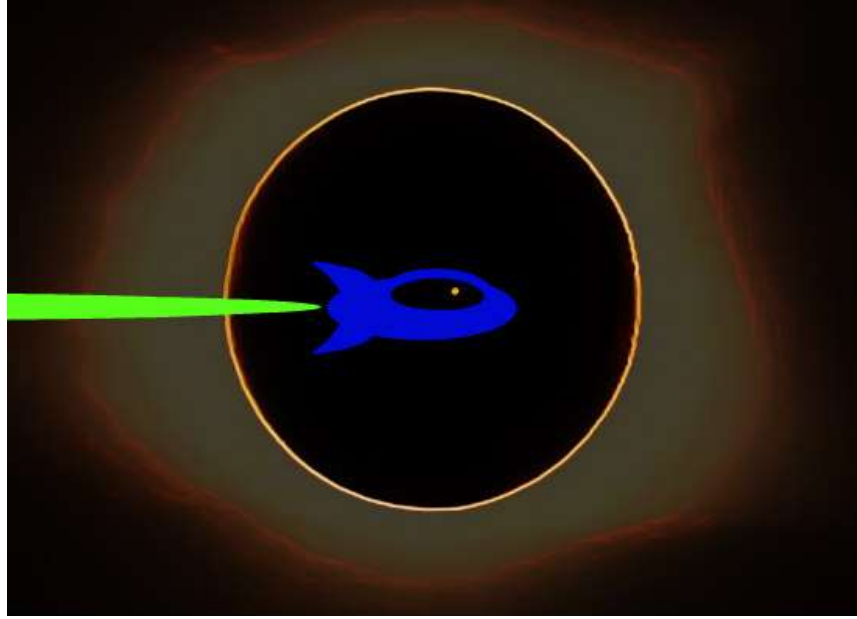


**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



**Columbia Eclipsed** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | Aug. 2017

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by Mike Bozart

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At 6:32 AM in the predawn of Monday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, I parked the old grey ghost (our 2005 Kia Rio hatchback) in the middle of the unexpectedly-still-vacant asphalt lot off the western end of Laurel Street in Columbia (SC, USA). There would be an eclipse-viewing event later in the adjacent Riverfront Park. Without prior notice, a middle-aged female Caucasian jogger in a USC (University of South Carolina) Gamecocks tank top passed by our front bumper. *She's certainly not lazy. Dedicated to her regimen, even in this sauna-like weather. / What discipline.*

Monique (Agent 32, my adventure-loving Filipina wife) and I (Caucasian Agent 33) had left east Charlotte at 4:44 AM, as we feared a traffic jam after seeing the images from Oregon. Surprisingly, traffic wasn't too bad on the 101-mile (163 km) trek down Interstate 77 in the dark; we had beat the stampede from points north.

We got out of the car and walked down to the trailhead, curled around the restroom buildings, and then walked onto a steel pedestrian bridge. I looked down midway across and saw a water snake slithering up the distant muddy bank of the 1891 hydroelectric canal. *Should I tell Monique? No, snakes freak her out. She'll want to leave. / What lies ahead today? Hope we don't have to walk too far. It's already hot, and the sun hasn't even cleared the trees.*

At a T-intersection the infernal sun crested the tree line. We turned right, as the paved trail to the left was locked-off for some reason. About 800 feet (244 meters) down the Three Rivers Greenway, which ran along a slender island for 2.4 miles (3.86 km) between the Columbia Canal and the Congaree River, an overlook appeared on the left. We walked on the elevated deck, spying the river 30 feet (nine meters) below. I saw a large snapping turtle blithely swimming with the current for a while, and then it dove out of sight, down into the depths of the dark green water. *Boy, that one was a monster. Maybe even bigger than the one I saw in Little Sugar Creek [in south Charlotte] a decade ago. / It would suck saggy balls to fall off this. Hope hubby doesn't do anything foolish. No place for a medical situation.*

Suddenly a 60-ish Caucasian guy appeared. He was in jeans and a logo-less yellow knit shirt. As he started peering over the railing, I wondered who he might be. *Is he here for the eclipse? Or, is he just another local out for morning*

*exercise? No, if he were a local, he wouldn't be looking around the way he is. It's obvious that he's never been here, either. / Hope this man isn't buang. [crazy in Cebuano]*

"Hello, are you down here for the solar eclipse?" I ventured.

"Yeah, sure am. The last one that I saw was in the Marshall Islands out in the Pacific on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. It lasted over four minutes. I got some great pics and video, which I sped up to make a nice 20-second clip."

I then noticed his camera bag. "So, you're an eclipse chaser," I said, stating the now-obvious.

"Yep, an umbraphile – the 50-cent name," he replied. *Umbraphile? That's right: Umbra means shadow. Is his significant other an umbrellaphile? [sic] / Wonder if he's a rank-and-file logophile.*

"Where did you come from?" Monique then asked. *Earth.*

"Charleston," the gentleman stated.

"South Carolina, right?" I asked just to be certain, as his accent was hard to place.

"Yes, the Charleston by sea. However, being near the ocean is not so ideal today. The outer bands of an Atlantic storm are forecast to send in a lot of clouds and even some rain today. That's why I decided to drive to Columbia. Better sky conditions. I got here in just two hours." *Not 2:02? Why do I think such numerical nonsense? / I bet that my husband wanted an oddly exact time. He's such a numerician. [sic]*

"I hear ya," I said. "We drove down from Charlotte. Traffic was mostly light. No real issues." *Except his ungodly morning breath. Hubby must have skipped the mouthwash in his haste to get out of the house.*

"A buddy of mine from Charlotte is supposed to meet me here later," the light-brown-hair-fading-to-silver man said. "I hope that he doesn't wait too long to leave. I've sat in Charlotte morning rush-hour traffic before. I imagine that today could be horrendous with all of the eastern Ohio, western Pennsylvania, West Virginia and southwestern Virginia traffic funneling through; it could be a real bottleneck." *Maybe so. / He sure knows his geography. Maybe he's a map-freak like my bana. [husband in Cebuano]*

“Plus the Triad and Triangle traffic,” I added.

“Yeah, those North Carolina metros will be coming down [Interstate] 77, too,” the possibly one-time scratch golfer concurred.

“I’m just glad that we’re already here,” I conveyed. “It’s a big relief. We’ve got the car safely parked in a free lot with no time limit. We’ll be on foot from hereon. We can find things to do to fill the intervening time.” *I certainly hope so. We’ve got over seven hours to kill. / This red-haired guy is not going to do any more driving in Columbia? Weird. That’s off-the-charts parking phobia. Almost as bad as Marty.*

“Will you be videoing and taking photos from here today?” Monique then asked him. *She’s the one with more sense.*

“Not here exactly,” he answered. “Those trees may be in the way – just a tad too tall. But, probably around here.” He then looked down at the river again. “Hey, I just saw the biggest alligator snapping turtle in my entire life. And, I’ve seen quite a few in my time.” *Wow! Another one? Or, the same one? This area must be Snapperville [sic] central / Yikes! No way would I even touch that water.*

“Ah, another toe clipper; just saw one down there a few minutes ago,” I disclosed. *Why didn’t he tell me? Is my bana making this up for the audio recorder?*

“This one looked more like a whole-hand remover,” the older gent stated. “Toes would just be the hors d’oeuvres.”

“Swimmers beware!” I announced and then chuckled. *Do people really swim in this river? Ew! He’s just making conversation. I just know that he’s recording this. I smell a short story in the offing.*

“So, what do you two do?” he then inquired.

“I work in safety and write meta-real short stories,” I replied. *Meta-real? I bet that they’re littorally awful – literary offal.*

“Occupational-accident-inspired vignettes?” the seemingly interested man asked.

“They’re always OSHA- [Occupational Safety & Health Administration] compliant,” I assured. *What? Pass.*

“And, what about you, young lady?” he asked Monique.

"I keep our ship off the shoals," my wife divulged. "Someone has to pay attention to imminent danger. I'm now at the helm. I review the recordings and drafts before we stamp the *psecret psociety* logo on them." *A secret society? Recordings and drafts? Are they recording this conversation now? Time to leave these two to their own devices.*

"Well, nice meeting you two," he said. "Let's hope for a cloudless hole in the upper southwestern sky at 2:43."

"Fingers crossed," Monique replied.

"Toes, too," I added. *What a nutter.*

The man then tipped his khaki-colored, long-billed, no-team baseball cap and walked back towards the main trail. He turned left and continued north towards Interstate 126. *We're off to a lucky start. He was perfect. Good material. / I just know that hubby is already sizing up a short story. Glad that guy was nice, and not a creep or a thief. / Wonder where those two wind up. God only knows.*

We then started to walk back to the parking lot, as I wanted to get my wide-brimmed Australian field hat out of the car. The sun's unobstructed rays were already roasting my fair-skinned, 53-year-old face. *Man oh man, it's already an oven. / Hope I don't faint. Don't think I can walk too far in this heat.*

At the restroom area, there was now a young African American gentleman. Monique noticed that he had a box of eclipse glasses. She briskly walked up to him, as we didn't have any (none to be had in the Charlotte area).

"How much are the eclipse glasses?" she asked.

"They're free," he stated. "How many pairs do you need?"

"Just two for me and my husband," Monique replied.

"Here you go," the amiable man said as he handed the folded, very-dark-lensed, cardboard glasses to Monique.

"Yey!" she then exclaimed. "Thank you so much!"

"Let me give you a tip," I suggested to the very-dark-skinned park employee. "Is \$10 ok? Or, how about 20?"

He shook his head and his hands. "No, I'm not allowed to take any money." *An honest man. He's certainly not politician material. I bet that he does well in life. Hope so.*

“Are you absolutely sure?” I pleaded, wanting to at least pay for his lunch. *So very nice of him. Was expecting to pay \$40 for a pair, and we got them for free! Amazing. Credit Monique for asking. I’m sure I would’ve walked right on by.*

“Absolutely,” he firmly answered. “Enjoy the eclipse.”

“Ok, big thanks,” I reiterated.

“We will be able to watch it directly now,” Monique added. “Thanks again, sir.”

“You’re most welcome,” he replied.

Two minutes later we were at our humble automobile. I got my desired hat out of the hatch as Monique got some drinks and treats out of the cooler in the back seat.

“Got everything, asawa?” [wife in Cebuano and Tagalog]

“I think we’re all set, Agent 33.” *Agent 33. Yep, she knows that the switch is on; she knows that the little red light is lit.*

“And, we’re off, Agent 32!” I broadcasted. *Hope we get inside an air-conditioned place as soon as possible. I’m already sweating like a carabao. [Philippine water buffalo] / Hope we can avoid the bummerazzi. [sic]*

We then began our pedestrian journey towards Lady Street by exiting the parking lot onto Gist Street, walking south, making a left onto Blanding Street, rounding a right curve and finding ourselves on Williams Street. *Williams Street. That’s the outfit that did ‘Space Ghost Coast to Coast’. / What in the world is my bana thinking of now? ‘Adult Swim’?*

At Taylor Street, which was already a bit busy, we had to stop and wait to cross.

“I wonder how much of this traffic is eclipse-related. What would you guess, Agent 32?”

“Probably 55.55 percent, Agent 33.” *Why did she pick that repeating-digit percentage? / That should get his marble spinning for a few minutes.*

We safely crossed Taylor and continued walking down Williams for a block, arriving at a very busy downtown-bound Hampton Street. We turned left and walked beside a disused field up to Huger Street. There we crossed the wide one-way street. *Wow! Seven lanes. Can’t remember the last time I*

*crossed a seven-lane, one-way, city street. / Bana is taking mental notes; I can almost hear the clanking of his old gears.*

Once across the thoroughfare, I pushed the little crosswalk button inside the yellow box on the silver post. It worked. We then traversed a fairly busy, six-lane, two-way Huger Street to get in the shadow of the three-story Congaree Building. Next, we took a much-needed beverage break.

“No shortage of heat,” I said, attempting some comic levity.

“How much farther?” Monique asked. “I’m already steamed.”

*“Lady Street is just up that hill. Then it’s only 999 feet [304.5 meters] to the door, epic all-leaguer Agent 32.” I’m too hot and tired for crazy numerical distances and psecret psociety agent-number nonsense. / She’s running on fumes. Just let her have a nice break here in the shade.*

“Ok, just give me five minutes, bana.”

“Sure, asawa. No rush. We’re way ahead of schedule.”

Seven minutes later we were marching again. We soon passed a young, white, male, uniformed parking-lot attendant who was standing guard over a coned-off Traffic Court tarmac. However, the sidewalk soon ended and there was no way to walk on the grass, as it was a 50° sideways slope. *Oh, no. / Crap! Stopped with just a block to go.*

“What do we do now, Parkaar?” [my ailing alias]

“Maybe we can cut through the parking lot to the side street, Monique. It goes right up to Lady Street.”

“Let’s just talk to that man down there to be sure, dear.”

“It’s probably ok to just cut across, 32.” *But, maybe not.*

“Well, let’s just make sure, bana.” *Don’t want to get in any trouble in this town.*

“Ok, ok,” I relented. *She’s a little paranoid. Can’t imagine getting arrested for walking across an empty county-government-owned parking lot. / Can’t trust his bad luck.*

We walked back down to the 20-something man in silence, sweating profusely and smelling undoubtedly ripe. *My deodorant failed an hour ago. / This place is hot!*

“Hello,” I said to him, staying 10 feet (three meters) away to spare him my *lovely* aroma. “Is it ok if we cut across the parking lot to Pulaski Street?”

“Sure, no problem,” he replied. “Are you guys here for the big solar eclipse?”

“You guessed it!” Monique exclaimed. “Do we look like eclipse tourists?”

“To be honest, yes, you do,” he answered.

We all had a chortle. Then Monique and I cut across the heat-reradiating, asphalt, almost-completely-devoid-of-vehicles parking lot.

“Wonder why they don’t open up the lot and charge eclipsers [*sic*] for parking spaces, Monique. I bet they could reel in a tidy sum of money.” *His brain must be parboiled now.*

“Probably because Traffic Court is in session today, and they want to keep it just for the parties in the cases.”

“That sounds about right, 32.” *Of course it does.*

We then walked over a grassy area and alighted on Pulaski Street. Up the hill we went. We were soon on Lady Street.

“Now, which way?” Monique asked.

“To the left, 32. It’s just past that bridge.” *Hope he’s right. My head is aching from this heat.*

After glancing at the twin railroad-track pairing below, we crossed the two-lane, planter-lined, quaint street. A few more strides later we had arrived at our intended destination: Carolina Ale House. *Yes, we’re here. / Thank God we finally made it. The heat has sapped my stamina. So freaking hot!*

I walked up to the thick wooden doors, hoping that maybe they opened early for the eclipse. No such luck. All locked. The posted hours stated that they would open for lunch at 11:00 AM, like it was just another ordinary Monday. I then looked at my cell phone. It was only 8:31 AM. *Jeez! Two and a half hours before they open. What to do?*

We sat down on a long bench next to the main entrance that was in the required shade. We didn’t say anything; we were exhausted. Then, several minutes later, a minivan and a sedan pulled into the parking lot – a parking lot that had



many open spaces. *We could have just parked here. What was he thinking? I bet that he just wanted to see that canal.*

The people who got out of the red Honda Odyssey knew the people in the silver Nissan Sentra. They were from Maryland and Virginia, respectively (going by their license plates). The middle-aged Caucasian crew of six walked over to us.

“I guess that you guys must be first in line,” a jolly, rotund, brown-haired lady said.

“Not by design,” Monique riposted.

“We got here much earlier than expected,” I informed.

“I heard that they will open early,” a bespectacled, nearly bald, 50-ish man said. *Yes! / That’s great news.*

“How early?” Monique asked.

“10:45,” he replied. *Darn! Was hoping for 9:00 AM. / Drats! That’s still a long, long, long time from now.*

The party of six then started talking amongst themselves. They were debating going somewhere else to observe the eclipse, like to the State Fairgrounds. Then, after maybe five minutes of discussion, half of them took off in the van to do some reconnaissance of other viewing sites in Columbia.

Restaurant employees began showing up. They entered through a side door. Soon a black employee was sweeping the parking lot. It was now 9:05. *One hundred minutes on the wall. If one of these minutes should accidentally fall ...*

“Hey mahal, [love in Tagalog] how would you like to walk over to Starbucks?” I asked. “It’s only two blocks away. We’ll order a pair of caramel frappuccinos and relax in the A/C. [air conditioning] What do you say?” *More sun, more heat, and more walking = more sweat, more body odor, and more fatigue. I’m already soaked, smelly and spent. No way.*

“No, that’s ok, 33. I’m just going to wait it out right here. We may lose our spot in line and not get a table.” Monique looked exhausted, and maybe slightly dehydrated.

“Ok, just an idea, my prescient princess.” *Ah, if I could only foresee the future ... We wouldn’t be sitting here right now.*

Then the front doors were being unlocked. A young, slightly short, slim African American male stepped out. “Hey, you

guys are welcome to come inside,” he said. “But, you won’t be able to order any food or drinks until 11 o’clock.” *Most excellent! / Serendipity strikes again!*

“Thank you so much, sir,” Monique said. “It’s so freaking hot out here. We arrived way too early. We miscalculated.”

“I understand. My name is Troy. I’m the general manager. I want you to have a good time today. Now, just follow me.”

Troy then led us up the wooden steps to the upper level. He told us that we could sit anywhere, except for a few reserved tables on the concrete deck. We grabbed a four-top table inside near the bar and thanked him profusely again. Then he rushed off to prepare his crew for the onslaught of eclipse viewers. We could hear talk of a zone strategy.

For the next 90 minutes, we and three other patrons-to-be sipped ice water and watched ESPN on the flat screens. A Little League World Series game was on one of the TVs in the corner. The players and spectators were showing off their wacky eclipse glasses in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. *Wonder how much of the sun will be blocked by the moon there. [74%]*

Then at 10:45, the doors below were opened. People started to stream into the poster-lined tavern. At 11:01, Daryl, a young, über-courteous African American dude, took our order. *I bet he’s a college student. / Yey! Food is on the way!*

Soon were eating and drinking as the upstairs began to populate. I was chomping on a veggie flatbread pizza and Monique was contently eating her island tacos. The local dark beer wasn’t half bad. My wife nursed a Bailey’s on the rocks. *All in all, I think we chose a pretty good venue. / If dear hubby just would have parked here, we would not now be encrusted in sweat residue.*

An African American DJ began to set up on the west end of the deck. Monique then noticed him giving away eclipse glasses. She promptly went up and snagged another pair for souvenirs’ sake. When she returned to the table, I decided to chide her, playfully.

“Honey, you’re being greedy.” I had a guffaw.

“I’m not being greedy; he has a stack of them. Anyway, I only asked for two.” She had a totally serious look.

I smiled at her lovely naturally tanned face. “Ok, Miss Memento.” *He doesn't know how to seize an opportunity.*

Soon the DJ was pumping out a mélange of eclipse-related pop music. At 1:11 PM he made an announcement: “The Great American Eclipse of 2017 has begun in Columbia.”

I then went outside with a pair of ISO 12312-2 eclipse glasses in hand. I found a standing spot near the railing of the 15-feet-above-the-street (4.6-meter-high) terrace. After a slow-moving, pregnant-with-future-raindrops cumulus cloud passed, I noticed that the moon had taken a tiny slither out of the right side of the sun. *And so it silently begins ...*

Then Monique went outside to check it out 22 minutes later. However, she promptly returned.

“Someone bumped the back of my head, bana.”

“Well, it's pretty crowded out there, asawa. Some bumping of body parts is to be expected. Did they apologize?”

“Yes, she did.”

“How does it look now, 32?”

“Cookie-moon monster has taken a big bite, 33.”

At 2:20 a milk-white, middle-aged lady excitedly came up to our table. “Oh, you should go out and see it now. The sun is now three-fourths covered by the moon.”

At 2:24 I went out on the large balcony one last time. I looked north up the Gadsden Street hill, but couldn't make out the Governor's Mansion. Then I peered through the pitch-black lenses at the dark moon that had now claimed 80% of the tangerine sun. The recorded music blared. Pink Floyd's *Brain Damage/Eclipse* then started playing to a spattering of applause, howls and cheers. *Very close now.*

I then went downstairs at 2:39 PM to experience totality, but Monique stayed to watch it from above. She was still tired and said that she wanted to guard our belongings. She was suspicious of a certain lurker.

Once in the parking lot, I noticed crescent-shaped shadows from the maple trees' leaves. I saw some photographers who had already set up their cameras on tripods. Then I overheard one of them say that he was going to insert a toy

spaceship in front of the eclipse. *Ecliptacular [sic] idea, dude. Astronomical wig-out! Score!*

At 2:42 I held the eclipse glasses up to my eyes. In a matter of seconds I watched the orange crescent totally disappear. The crickets were now going crazy. Then there was nothing but blackness – no light of any kind. *Was the solar eclipse cancelled for nonpayment? Hope I remember that line.*

I removed the singular-use glasses to see a black moon blotting out the sun. There was a ring of radiating white light (the sun's corona) around it. It was such a stark, ultra-high-contrast image. *Never will forget this sight. Almost feels evil.*

Then I looked around. Twilight-level darkness pervaded the Palmetto State's capital city. It got less hot. People were hooting and hollering. *'Party like it's 1999.' Was there a total solar eclipse in 1999? [Yes, there was one on August 11<sup>th</sup> in Europe and southern Asia.]*

And then, it was all over so quickly. A blinding arc of the mad-as-hell sun reappeared. I took a final look. *All these roundish objects whizzing around in space. Millions of them. Make that billions. I bet there are super-intelligent entities out there. Probably too smart to waste time with us.*

The traffic on the way back to Charlotte was atrocious. It was mostly a crawl. We saw numerous wrecks on I-77. Ambulances were flying by us in the emergency lane every five miles (8 km). *At this rate we'll be home at midnight.*

We decided to bail on the interstate and took US 21 North from Ridgeway. The massive swell-like hills of the Midlands brought back memories of a family trip from Charlotte to the Isle of Palms (SC) in 1975 in a 1968 Dodge Polara station wagon. I remembered my dad's proclamation: "We're gonna have fun, goddamit! Starting right now." We all laughed three seconds later. Back then, Interstate 77 wasn't yet completed from Charlotte to Columbia, so motorists – including the 18-wheelers – were forced to use the dangerous, hilly, two-lane, mostly median-less highway. *This area of South Carolina sure has some giant hills – almost like the foothills of North Carolina in some of these stretches. Though, the highway is as straight as a line here. Wow! That hill must be two miles [3.2 km] ahead. Whew! A long way down on the right. / Wonder when the next total solar eclipse is in America. [April 8, 2024] Hopefully not in summer.*