

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Grandfathered by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | MARCH 2017

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by Mike Bozart

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My ever-curious Siquijodnon (Philippines) wife, codename Monique (aka Agent 32 in this ongoing meta-real saga), had brought up the idea of a trip to Grandfather Mountain once again. She had queried me about the three-hundred-million-year-old, 5,946-foot-elevation (1,812 meters above sea level), forest-covered, craggy mountain ridge near Linville (NC, USA) for several years. On this milder Saturday (March 18, 2017) morning, we would finally go check it out together. And, as we pulled out of our east Charlotte driveway, I hoped that the change of scenery would evoke another short story. (It obviously did.)

Traffic was light and pleasantly uneventful on Interstate 85 and US 321, save for a lone throttlehead. We were parked in front of the Mellow Mushroom stone pizzatorium fortress in Blowing Rock at 11:11 AM, just two hours and two minutes later. Yes, the palindromic times were bookending us once again. *Racecar. Kayak. No lemon, no melon. Shaken not stirred, derrits ton nekahs. [sic]*

Our small Thai dye pizza hit the spot once again; it was as good as the one in Greenville, South Carolina (mentioned in *Greenville Jaunt*). I downed a vanilla porter microbrew with it. Monique stayed with ice water. We left just as the popular restaurant began to fill; we had beat the rush.

After a visit to the upstairs coffee shop across the street (Camp Coffee Roasters) for java and a refrigerator magnet, we were rolling south on US 221. The black-on-white highway-route sign tripped a switch in my no-lemon melon. *US highways 221, 321 and 421 all converge in Boone. [NC] That's three _21s. Wonder if that occurs anywhere else in America.*

After passing Bass Lake, we took a right for the Blue Ridge Parkway. Monique looked at the grassy hill on the left.

“Parkaar, [my ailing alias] is that where we went sledding a couple of winters ago?”

“Yes, that is the knoll, Monique,” I replied as I rubbed my sleep-encrusted right eyelashes. “You do indeed have a mouse’s memory.” *A what?!*

“Hey, I thought the saying was an elephant’s memory, Agent 33?” *Recording? Check. / I just know that he’s already recording.*

“Well, a mouse’s memory is even better. Think of all the predators that a rodent has to remember.” *Huh.*

“But, a mouse has a much smaller brain, Parkaar. Haven’t they done studies with various animals? I don’t think any rodent made the top 10.”

“Bumped to no. 11 by an octopus’ tentacle.” *Don’t even ask.*

The conversation ceased as we passed over Sims Creek. As we came upon a most-heavenly-tranquil Sims Pond on the left, I realized that I had forgotten where the entrance to Grandfather Mountain State Park was. *Is it on NC 105? I don’t think it’s on the [Blue Ridge] Parkway. Directions time.*

“Monique, could you activate Google Maps on your cell phone, and set Grandfather Mountain State Park as the destination?”

“Sure. Just a second.” *He doesn’t know where the access point is? But, he said that he had been there before with Agent 66. His memory is crumbling fast.*

Monique entered the data and then placed her smartphone in the middle air-conditioning-duct-attached clamp (an add-on accessory that we had bought at a Ross store).

We passed some vacant, wide-open, already green, barbed-wire-enclosed meadows. There was still some snow in the shaded areas from last Sunday’s winter storm. The air temperature was about 50° Fahrenheit (10° Celsius).

Soon we were passing Price Lake on our left. The sky was mostly cloudy, but rays of sun filtered through the cumulus clouds’ gray underbellies, glimmering on the slate-colored, not-quite-flat surface. *Still looks the same.*

“Agent 66 and I walked all the way around that lake in 2008,” I said while rubbing my right eye yet again. *Why does this one eye collect so much sleep? Does my left eye watch my right one in the mirror all night? What a crazy thought. / I wonder what nonsense my kano [Philippine slang for American] is thinking now.*

“Is it a hard hike, Parkaartrotski?” *[sic]*

“No, the trail pretty much hugs the shoreline. Not much elevation change. Maybe we can do it next time.”

Monique just nodded.

We continued, passing the campground entrance on the right. Then 6.2 miles (10 km) of rhododendron-lined transit transpired in silence. The deciduous trees were still leafless. *Sure would be nice to live up here one day. / I just know that my husband is fantasizing about living here someday. Wonder if my hunch is correct. Guess I'll find out soon enough. I just know that he will write up this excursion.*

When we rounded a southward-jutting flank of Grandfather Mountain, we saw it: the Linn Cove Viaduct. The elevated, curvy like a stretched letter S, concrete roadway section appeared to be hovering alongside the mountain. *Never gets old seeing that.*

"Well, Monique, that's where we're headed," I said as I pointed to the engineering feat with my left hand.

"We have to drive on that?" *Oy!*

"Yes. Don't worry; it's safe. No major issues since it was completed in 1987." *What were the minor issues?*

"Ok, but go slow."

"Certainly. I don't want us to land on US 221, [100 meters – 328 feet – below] either. Well, not yet." *What is he talking about?*

We passed over some curved bridges that spanned steep ravines before finally driving on the viaduct. When I looked to the left, it appeared that we were on some self-levitating road, as nothing but the ominous sky could be seen above the concrete guard wall. *Please, dear God, no earthquake. / Wonder if Monique is saying a silent prayer.*

About 1.3 miles (2.1 km) further, we were following the Google Maps prompt to exit onto US 221 South. In just a mile (.62 km), we were at the park's vehicular entrance. We used a pair of coupons from the free *High Country Visitor's Guide* copies that we had snagged at Mellow Mushroom in Blowing Rock. It saved us four bucks. (Total cost for both of us: \$36.)

The admission ticket came with a CD that was like an invisible tour guide for the ascent. First item of note: MacRae Meadows, home of the annual Scottish Highland Games. After some gentle curves and a sharp switchback, we arrived

at Split Rock and Sphinx Rock. Then we turned right to enter the parking lot for the Nature Museum. It wasn't very crowded. There was no problem getting a decent spot.

"Well, we picked a good day to come up here, Monique. The cool, showery weather has kept the hordes away." [It was 43° Fahrenheit; 6° Celsius.] *Gosh, he hates crowds so much.*

"I bet that you would love it if we were the only two up here, Parkaarsolitario." [sic] *Yes, I would.*

"Score! I'll use that one, Monique." *I'm sure that he will.*

Once inside the Grandfather Mountain Nature Museum (complete name on the exterior wall), we checked out the flora and fauna exhibits. Then we watched a looping, continuously playing, informative, short film in the small theater.

As we neared the restrooms, I made an announcement at a louder-than-normal volume: "They forgot to mention the ground waves, Agent 32."

Monique replied as if she already knew. "A strategic omission, Agent 33."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that we had intrigued a 30-something Caucasian female staff member and a middle-age Asian couple. *Triumph. Now they'll have something novel to talk about.*

We exited and checked out the fenced Wildlife Habitat. We went down to the bear area first. A black bear with a tawny coat was sunning herself on a large boulder. Monique got her cell phone out and started to take a video. (It's on the psecret psociety Facebook page.) Here's the transcript:

Monique: "Go!"

Parkaar: "Alright. Looks like a brown bear."

Unknown male: "Her name is Koko." *Or, Cocoa?*

[just the sound of wind and footsteps for several seconds]

Unknown male: "I've never seen her on the rock before. Not on this rock. I've never seen any of them on this rock."

Unknown female: "She's my baby."

Unknown male: "Koko's my favorite."

Unknown female: "Hello pretty! You're so pretty. You pretty girl. Oh-" [cut] *Pretty? That bear would find your flesh to be pretty tasty, I bet.*

We moseyed along towards the deer area. On the way, we observed some bald eagles in a tall enclosure. *A mouse's memory.*

"Monique, did you hear the *pretty* remarks back there?"

"Yes, that bear was staring at them with a hungry look."

"That bear was probably hoping that they'd fall into the pit, Monique. Human flesh would be a nice afternoon treat. Quite the delicacy."

Monique laughed. "I was thinking the same thing, 33."

Once at the deer observation deck, we noticed a white-tailed family of three in view, but they were far off in the distance. Thus, we moved on to the otter tank.

"With eastern cougars now extinct, Monique, the deer have one less predator to worry about."

"When did those cougars go extinct?"

"Officially in 2011, I believe. But they may have all died-out several years earlier."

"I guess that trying to figure out when the last one died is kind of hard, Parkaar." *Who will be the last human?*

We then came upon a jolly Hispanic family of five.

"I wonder if the last eastern cougar knew that it was the last one." *Huh?*

"What a most ridiculous thought, Agent 33!" *Glad that she raised her voice. Excellent.*

We watched a pair of river otters swim underwater for a few seconds. Then they exited the tank to sun themselves on a slanted rock. *All in an otter's day.*

"Ready to head back and check out that mile-high swinging suspension bridge, Agent 32?"

"How much does it swing, 33?"

“Not so much since they replaced the wooden planks with metal ones. I think it was in the late ‘90s.” [It was 1999.]

We then backtracked to our little hatchback, which was as gray as the nimbus clouds. Right after we got inside, a few wind-blown raindrops splattered on the windshield.

“How long is it going to rain?” Monique asked.

“Probably just a few minutes. Just a passing shower, mahal. [love in Tagalog] I saw the radar on the weather display in the Nature Museum.” *He would have to check that out.*

Up the mountain we went, switchbacking past Cliffside Overlook and Sheer Bluff. After a trio of tight hairpin turns, we arrived at the highest parking lot. I parked with our car facing the famous bridge. The rain had already quit.

“Well, this is it, Monique. Are you ready for it?”

“I guess so. Let’s do it!”

We both exited the car. The wind was in a word: fierce. And in another word: sustained. *This northwest gale must be a nonstop 30 MPH (48.3 km/h) with gusts over 45 MPH (72.4 km/h). / Wow! Up here is so much windier than below.*

I struggled to get my windbreaker-attached hood on. The strong wind ripped it about like a flag. Finally, I walked over to the stone wall at the base of the swinging bridge for a wind block. It worked. I got my hood on and tied the drawstring under my chin. *Sheezus H. Christ! [sic] Forgot how windy it is up here.*

Monique had climbed the zigzagging steps while I was fussing with my hood. When I arrived on the ridgeline trail, she was slowly walking towards the suspension bridge. Then, all of a sudden, she stopped and started flapping her hands.

“No, no, no,” she said. “I can’t do this.”

I came up behind her and took her left hand. “Sure, you can, asawa.” [wife in Tagalog and Cebuano]

Then a small Caucasian boy, probably only six years old, passed us and strolled onto the whistling bridge. (It sounded like an otherworldly harmonica.)

Monique then followed him. And, I followed her.

Once in the middle of the bridge, some 80 feet (24.4 meters) above the ravine, we noticed a white-text-on-green tread:

1 MILE 5,280 FT.

Monique walked over to it. I snapped a pic.



“We’re not a mile above that glen, Parkaar.”

“No, mahal; we’re not. But, we’re one mile [1,609 meters] above mean sea level.” *Mean sea?*

“How about friendly sea level?” *Huh?*

“Yeah, that, too, Monique,” I said as a winter-coated, facescarf-wrapped adult party of three approached.

“I’m ready to go back now, Agent 33.”

“Yeah, me, too, Agent 32. This ferocious wind might blow us over to Grandmother Mountain.” [2 miles – 3.2 km – south, as a straight-line crow flies]

One of the ladies heard me and gave me an odd look. *Success in small instances.*

We then walked over to a thick-walled (to withstand the high winds) structure called the Top Shop. We took the elevator down to the first floor. In the gift shop, I bought a souvenir coffee mug for Monique. It had her name on it.

We then marched back to our car. The wind was still howling. *Don’t think I could live up here.*

The descent down the mountain was incident-free. We cleared the gatehouse. I then turned left onto US 221 North. We soon went under the Blue Ridge Parkway. *I want to find that cave.*

Monique noticed the change in route. “You don’t want to take the [Blue Ridge] Parkway back?”

“No, mahal. I want to show you a Grandfather Mountain attraction that tops them all.”

“If it involves roaming with black bears, count me out!”

“No, nothing like that. No animals are involved.”

The conversation died out. We crawled along US 221, curve by curve. (It is more sinuous than the Blue Ridge Parkway in this stretch.) Then I saw a tall concrete pier through the woods on my left. It was one of seven that supported the Linn Cove Viaduct. *This is it! Where’s that turnout?*

Soon we came upon an unsigned gravel parking area on the right side of a left bend in the highway. I pulled into it and parked. No one else was in the turnout. *Perfect!*

“Well, honey, this is it,” I announced.

“All I see are trees.”

“I mean, this is the parking spot. The hike is only $\frac{7}{10}$ of a mile.” [1.13 km]

“Seven tenths of a mile to what, bana?” [husband in Cebuano]

“It’s a surprise, dear!” *Oh, no! I was afraid he was going to say that.*

“We won’t be in physical danger, will we?” *Maybe psychic.*

“No, we’ll be fine. Promise.”

“Ok, let’s go before another round of rain moves in.”

And with that plainly stated accord, we were off on foot. We walked southward along the shoulder to a left curve. There we crossed the highway and picked up a faint, mostly leaf-covered, narrow path. *Where in the world is he taking me? This had better be worth it.*

Next, we started to climb a wash. Medium-size boulders were strewn about the little wet-weather channel. We carefully stepped over them, sometimes holding hands for balance and support.

“How much farther?” Monique asked after we passed over a mossy series of cobbles.

I then looked upslope and spied a concrete viaduct column. “We’re almost here.” *What?*

“You mean almost *there*, right?”

“Ah, yes. Sorry, my last marble is now cracked.”

Monique wasn't amused. I looked up again at the bottom of the albescent concrete viaduct. A lone raindrop landed right in my right eye. *I hope I'm on course. If this just results in a cold soaking, I'll never hear the end of it.*

We marched up another 50 meters (164 feet), and there it was: the cave.

“There is now here, Monique. That's our magic cave.” I started to walk towards the six-foot (two-meter), vertical-oval opening in the gray bedrock.

“Have you lost your mind, Parkaarloko?” [sic] *Probably.*

“It's ok, Monique. Charlie said it was bat-free.” *Charlie? Is he talking about 'that' Charlie?*

“What about bear-free, 33?”

“Absolutely. I'll go first, mahal.”

“We don't even have a flashlight!”

“That's ok; we can use our cell phones. It's only about twenty feet [6 meters] deep. You can guard the entrance.” *No way!*

“You're not leaving me outside! I'm going in with you.”

“Ok, fine. C'mon.”

We both got our cell phones in flashlight mode. The passage was initially five feet (1.5 meters) in height and about a yard (meter) in width. The floor of the cave was damp dark earth. Thirteen feet (4 meters) in, it was pitch-dark. The cave then bent slightly to the right and got lower and tighter. At the end, our beams of light refracted off an expanse of quartz crystals with two earphones hanging down. *What in this bizarre subterranean void is this?! / Yey! Charlie left them.*

I crouched way down, and made my way over to the quartz corner. I sat down on a rock that someone had left in the recent past. “Monique, when I drop my right hand, no talking or flashlight for three minutes. Ok?”

She nodded. I then inset the earphones and gave her the signal. *Well, here goes. / Listening to rocks? He must have been sky-high in here.*

Suddenly it was incredibly dark and eerily quiet. Then a faint sound emerged from the earphones. It was like a low-frequency, low-volume hum. And then it started to grow in intensity. The Grandfather Mountain groundwave, Charlie called it. Next, it was changing pitch at irregular intervals. And then, sharp, jarring sounds were interspersed. Then the low-level hum mutated into a groan. Next, there were some banging sounds, kind of like a pile driver. And then, indecipherable whispering commenced. I wondered if it was in the Cherokee language.

And then Monique turned on her smartphone's flashlight – right in my face! “Time's up, psychonaut!”

“Has it already been three minutes, Monique?”

“Three minutes and thirteen seconds, Sportzee. [*sic*] Did you hear anything besides your internal chatter?”

“Yes, I heard a lot of different sounds. I guess they were grandfathered in.” *What?!*

“Are you ready to go back now?”

“You don't want to have a listen?”

“I'll download it later.” *Huh?*