



Greensboro Gaffe

by **Mike Bozart** (Agent 33 of psecret psociety) | May 2013

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Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) boarded the 5:15 PM northbound Amtrak in Charlotte. As we rolled out of the rail yard, I wondered: *Might this rail journey yield a short story?*

The trip was largely uneventful, except for a strange Caucasian man of slight build, who boarded in Kannapolis. I'd say that he was about 55 to 60 years old. He seemed very agitated, almost frightened. His head kept turning, as if he were looking for – or out for – someone.

We tried to avoid his gaze, but then he caught Monique spying on him.

“Have you seen Jim?” he suddenly asked.

Monique just shook her head. *He's loko. [crazy in Filipino]*

When I looked at him, he turned away, and began fidgeting with his jacket's zipper. *An odd one here. He's definitely short-story-worthy wort. Must remember this.*

By Salisbury, he had calmed down. And, at High Point, he exited the train and hiked up the station steps and was gone. *Wonder what his story is. Another walk-off mystery.*

The train pulled into Greensboro a few minutes earlier than scheduled at 6:45 PM. The sun was going down on a warm April evening. *What a perfect spring evening in the Triad.*

Our hotel, The Greensboro Biltmore, was only four blocks west of the station. It was an easy walk. We traveled light. I had a backpack replete with previous short stories like this one – the one that you are now reading right now – however, Monique only had a blue handbag.

We signed in at the front desk. The young lad gave us room 225. He said that we would like it. I found that to be a somewhat curious remark. Yet, no notes were found in the hotel room.

The only weird thing that we noticed was that a lower dresser drawer was left open an inch. I promptly accepted the gaping invitation and deposited a copy of *Gold* (the short story; the novel had not been written yet).

Monique and I were tired. We decided to take a twenty-minute recharge nap. We were scheduled to meet Agent 14 at 8:00 PM at Thai Pan on South Elm Street. It was just around the corner. zzzzzz

We woke up at 7:45, and were in front of the closed Asian restaurant by 7:57.

“Well, Agent 14 was right, Monique; this place is indeed closed,” I said.

Monique wasn’t buying that explanation. She checked the note on the door.

“Ok, so what do we do now, Parkaar?” [my ailing alias]

“I’ll text him.”

And, I did. Agent 14 promptly re-texted.

Own m’eye whey, two blocks tew weigh.

Several minutes went by. Monique was impatient.

“Just call him, 33.”

I did. And, as I was talking to Agent 14, I saw him walking down the street. Then he saw me, and we hung up our cell phones.

Agent 14, a 50-ish Caucasian gent, drifted towards us. He had a hobble in his gait. *Is he already smashed?*

We shook hands. He gave Monique a big hug.

“How would you like to be a part of my next short story, 14?” (He was a voracious reader of all things psecret psociety.)

“Does it involve Jim?” he asked.

“Funny that you should ask about Jim, Agent 14,” I said.

“Yeah, there was a guy on the train asking about him,” Monique added.

“Maybe he’s on the steepest and longest escalator in the world,” Agent 14 said. *Ah, he read the DC one.*

“What?!” Monique exclaimed.

“Never mind him, 32; he’s just pulling lines from the previous story,” I explained.

“Thyme’s sprinkled in a brochure,” 14 then said.

“I wish that I could see how you spelled that, Agent 14,” I said, knowing that he probably meant the spice spelling.

“Jest [*sic*] hold the mirror at the write [*sic*] angle when you grab that Pilot felt-tip pen, 33,” Agent 14 directed. “Don’t crash and burn again.”

Well, to make a short story even shorter, we ended up next door at a back table in Crafted – The Art of Taco.

“It’s great to finally meet you, Agent 14,” Monique said.

“Likewise, 32; 33, not so much.” He smiled.

I chuckled. “He’s just as advertised; isn’t he, Monique?”

“Agent 14, you are so funny!” Agent 32 said, still laughing.

We ordered some alcoholic drinks: PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon) for me and 14; a large, curved glass of Moscato wine for 32.

“Are you hungry?” Agent 32 asked.

“Yes, I am, Monique. How about you, 14?”

“Just hungry for that cook,” Agent 14 said with a leer.

“Ok, Monique; I think he’ll be on a liquid diet tonight,” I said with a chuckle.

The conversation moved from where everyone grew up to where we now sat.

“Why did you change it from Café 23 to psecret psociety, 33?” Agent 14 asked, catching me off-guard, though there wasn’t much to hide or shield.

“Well, you were there, 14. Remember the night it burned down? Remember that electronic earwig in the smoldering embers?”

“Ernie!” Monique shouted.

“Blightener!” Agent 14 blurted.

“What?!” Agent 32 asked with a stunned expression.

“Hey, did you follow us to DC, Agent 14?” I asked out of utmost curiosity. “Posting bills on doors, were you?”

“I am sworn to secrecy. It’s the agent’s code, you know, 33.” Agent 14 announced this very aristocratically.

“Is that so?” I asked. No reply.

“Are you wearing a wire, 33?”

“Possibly. How about you, 14?”

“Just a push-up for added support,” Agent 14 stated.

We all laughed. Nearby diners looked at us.

“Agent 14 is so hilarious, 33,” Monique said.

“Yeah, he’s on his game tonight.”

Well, it went on like that for about a half-hour ... until Agent 14’s beer glass was empty. I ordered us another round.

Agent 14 then posed the question of the day to our college-age, tattooed, bo-ho, hipster waitress: “Have you seen Jim?”

Not one bit confused, she had a quick reply. “Yeah, I saw him last week at the San Francisco airport.” *That is whacked.*

I realized that even my current thoughts were lines in the last short story – one just like this one – the one that you are

reading now. *These recursive looping spirals ... always in all ways, well, they do so go.*

Monique noticed that I had fallen into another neural fractalization, and then shouted: "Hey, snap out of it!"

"Hello!" Agent 14 then said. "Come back and join us."

"Still lost in Plasma-Wigwood, 33?"

I really wanted to tell Monique that I knew that she was going to say that. But, then Agent 14 chimed in, right on cue.

"They, themselves. Them elves, on them shelves."

"What do you mean, 14?" I asked. "That's not in any short story yet, it's not even in the SFO one."

"Woah, this train of thought is getting away from us," Agent 14 then said. "Who would have thunked [*sic*] it, 33?"

"I don't know what you guys are talking about," Monique then quipped."

"Me, either," I said.

And, it went on like this for another fifteen or twenty minutes, until Agent 14 slammed his empty beer mug down on the wooden table. He had a pronouncement.

"Here ye, here ye, I have a shortened tall tale to tell. Krystal hid the money in the automaton."

"What?" I just shook my head and smiled. *Agent 14 is really onto our little game ... but how? Were we that obvious?*

Were our breadcrumbs not biodegrading in the cold March rains?

So many questions raced through my brain. And, when Agent 14 started talking about leaky faucets, I knew our gig was up.

“You seem to know a lot, Agent 14,” Monique hinted.

“Call me the *eye in the sky*,” Agent 14 said.

“How do you know Krystal, Agent 14?” I asked. *His answer should be very revealing.*

“Look, there it is!” Agent 14 yelled. “No, it’s over there! Manic misdirection, mates.”

“But, did you meet Krystal in DC, Agent 14?” Agent 32 asked, hoping for a legitimate answer.

“Oh, Monique, you know that a psecret [*sic*] agent can’t reveal his/her sources. And, make sure you place a silent ‘p’ in front of ‘secret’ when you type up this conversation, Agent 33. I know you’ve got your cell phone recording this. I know your sly technique.” *Huh?*

“You watch too many spy movies, 14,” I said.

“He hardly knows how to turn his cell phone on, Agent 14,” Monique said.

We had a guffaw. I quickly finished my second beer and caught the attention of our waitress. I picked up the tab, and we proceeded to the front door.

Once on the sidewalk, yet another Agent 14 performance began. Some white dude in his mid-40s of slender build walked by in a black sweater. He stopped about ten feet from us and started talking to some black Rasta hipsters. Agent 14 was very intrigued.

“Is that you, Jim?” Agent 14 asked.

He yelled this so loud that everyone on the block could hear him. There was no answer back from the man in the black sweater. Though, he seemed startled and promptly ended his conversation with the Rasta guys, and slipped away down an alley towards Davie Street.

“I know that was Jim,” Agent 14 said. “I know it was him! C’mon, let’s chase Jim down. He can’t be that fast.”

Before we could react, Agent 14 was a-hopping and a-skipping down South Elm Street, and then down an alley.

Monique and I chased after him. As we caught up to Agent 14, he caught up to the man in the black sweater.

“Jim, what did you do with Jill?” Agent 14 boldly asked.

The man in the black sweater turned and looked at him. He was purely puzzled.

“I don’t know who Jill is,” he said as he rubbed his right eye. “You must have me mistaken for someone else. Goodnight, sir.”

Agent 14 turned and looked at me and Monique. “Faux pas and fox paws.”

The man disappeared into the Carolina spring night. Agent 14 bowed, and then made another announcement: "Remember, none of this ever happened."

After that, he bolted down Hughes Street. And then he was gone. We didn't see either of them again.

Monique and I walked back to our hotel. When we got to the unnamed alley adjacent to the hotel, we saw a group of four college students smoking weed next to a dumpster. The odor was pungent. We just glanced at each other, grinned, and proceeded to our room. It had been a long day.

Once back in the room, Monique glanced up at me with a haggard expression. "When you write this day up, you won't exaggerate, will you?"

"Exaggerate? Why, never – just embellish a few details."

Monique sighed and rolled her eyes, and was quickly asleep.

I laid my tired body in the bed beside her, just half-watching The Weather Channel.

"Only a slight chance of rain tomorrow. Low: 54; high: 73."
Ah, perfect morning walking weather.

I began to wonder if Jim was in Greensboro. Agent 14 seemed convinced that he was. But, then again, he was pretty loaded.

I could hear a freight train approaching. The horn blew as the wheels rumbled down the tracks. Then all was quiet again.

I remembered that I once lived in this town, some 41 years ago, over on Howard Street. I believe the address was 615. Yes, I can see the numerals on the plastic, olive-green trash can that my dad let me paint one April night in 1972. When we moved to Charlotte, we brought it with us. We used it until roll-out garbage containers were issued.

<FLASH> A sudden burst of white light from across the alley. I glanced through the wooden window louvers. *Oh, my!*

