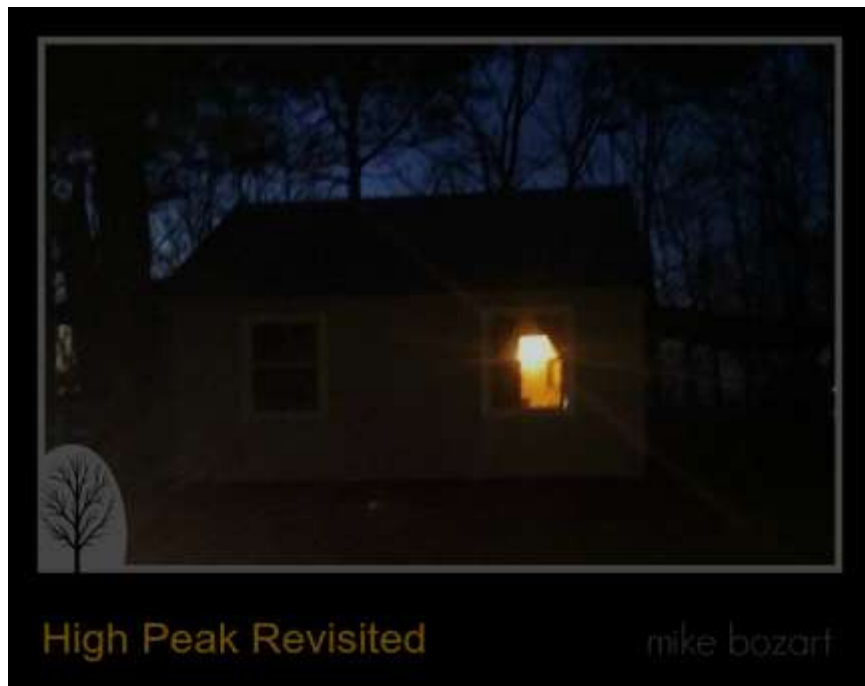


another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



High Peak Revisited by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | APR 2016

“Where are we going, dad?” Agent 666 asked from the right backseat as I turned the gray Kia Rio hatchback left onto Etowah Park Road (from US 64 West).

“High Peak, son. It’s where I lived from December of 1997 through November of 2001.” *High Peak? Sounds like the top of a tall-ass mountain.*

“How far is it from here?” my son then asked. *Gosh, I hope it isn’t more than five minutes. I have to pee.*

“Four miles,” I replied.

I made a left at the stop sign that came up in just 700 feet. We were now going south on Etowah School Road. The old elementary school quickly came up on the left. A mile and a half later we were crossing an olive green stream.

“What creek is this?” Monique (Agent 32) asked from the shotgun seat. *I bet my geo-nerdo [sic] husband will know.*

“It’s the French Broad River,” I replied. “The same river that flows through Asheville. We’re probably about 30 miles upstream of the Craven Street Bridge.” *I knew he’d know. / What bridge was that? Gosh, dad is such a geography freak.*

I turned right at the stop sign onto Pleasant Grove Road. We stayed in the river valley for one mile, passing farms and a small creek. Then we turned left onto Pleasant Grove Church Road. Next, after just a tenth of a mile, I turned right onto a wide dirt trail: High Peak Road.

The orange-red clay roadbed was severely rutted. I had to drive very slowly to carefully maneuver the car around the pits and craters so as to not bottom out and get stuck. *It's just as bad as it ever was. Some things never change in this land that time forgot.*

We began to pass a string of rundown mobile homes. Many of these old trailers looked like they were barely keeping the elements out. They were in very rough condition. *Everyone has got to live somewhere, but this looks even bleaker than before. / Did dad live in one of these? / This is poverty acres. Was Parkaar [my ailing alias] really that poor back then?*

"Damn! There's a confederate flag, dad!"

"Yeah, I just ignored those people, son. I think this area is now more Mexican than redneck."

"That's an improvement," my son added.

"I agree," Monique then said.

"Me, too," I concluded.

The luckily dry road (was a complete nightmare to traverse when muddy) began to ascend. Then it became a grade C gravel road. *They must have just had another load of gravel dropped on it. I wonder how many of the homeowners actually pitched in. 40%? 30%? So many deadbeats on this mountain. I sure don't miss this road.*

I slowly swung wide in the first switchback. Then we began to climb the mountain in earnest. There were no residences

in this section. *What an insane road! / I wonder how high we have to climb.*

The second switchback was a tight hairpin. I dropped the manual transmission into 1st gear, as this was a very steep ascent now. *Hope I don't shoot gravel.*

"Back in January of 1998, snow and ice sat on this road for several weeks," I said.

"Why did it last that long?" Agent 666 asked.

"Because they cut this road on the northeast side of the mountain, son. With the low winter sun angle, no sunlight ever hits the road surface. Thus, minimal melting occurs during cold snaps. Oh, I almost slid off the mountain in this section in my old green Plymouth Voyager minivan." *Yikes!*

The Kia successfully scaled the incline. I then turned the steering wheel slightly to the left.

"We called this curve 'the elbow'," I announced. "There was a collision here one winter. One car went halfway down that ravine on your right." *Woah!*

"Did anyone die?" Monique asked.

"No, just bruises."

I carefully negotiated the third switchback. We climbed on. Then we rounded a left curve to see a nice log-style home for sale on the right. *Well, it's definitely nicer up here. / Glad to get out of that valley.*

We passed some average-looking mobile homes on the left as we curved around the pond known as Banks Lake. *Wow, I remember walking with my little dog around that pond 18 years ago. I sure miss that dachshund-feist rescue mutt.*

Next, I made a hard left turn. Another very steep climb on loose gravel commenced. Two hundred feet into the ascent, I slowed down and pointed to a black and gray, small, decked house on the left.

“Well, that’s where I lived,” I said. “1085 High Peak Road. 1.085 miles from where we left the asphalt.”

“Were you alone there for those 47 months, Agent 33?” Monique then asked. *I know that he’s recording this. / She knows that I’m recording this. / Agent numbers again. Dad is so crazy.*

I stopped the car across from the house as the late afternoon sun dropped below the western rim. *I grew to loathe this drive, but I always liked arriving back here. So peaceful. So serene.*

“Very much alone, 32. A few dates and visitors from Charlotte. Some neighbors would stop by, who you will soon meet. But, mostly just me and my four-legged companion, Viche.”

“What did you do there, dad?”

“I did technical writing for money and creative writing for fun. I also did a lot of wall art while in that house. Took lots of

nice hikes around the mountain, too. Did a lot of exploring. Found some odd things in the woods.”

“It seems so lonely, dad.”

“Yeah, it was at times, son, but I grew to mostly like it. I was a lone wolf back then.”

“A perfect place for an antisocial hermit,” Monique then added.

I let out a half-chuckle. “No, no, I wasn’t a Ted Kaczynski. I wasn’t making bombs.”

We had a chortle over that. Then I let the clutch out and we continued climbing the hill. We curved right at the top and passed some mobile homes in good repair. *I wonder how Don and Fay are doing. So many of these people up here are former Floridians. Maybe they couldn’t take the humid heat anymore and traded a few chilly weeks in the winter for escape from six months in the saunasphere. [sic]*

We then arrived at a three-point intersection. I veered to the right and we descended. After braking for 333 feet (best guesstimate), I turned into a gravel driveway: Angeline and Kelvin’s house. *It still looks about the same. I wonder if Kelvin is already drunk.*

“Well, we’re here,” I said. “Time to get out and put a face to Angeline and Kelvin.”

We slowly got out of the car and began to march down a gangplank-style wooden walkway to their cozy, two-bedroom

house. Their new dog detected our approach and excitedly greeted us with a wagging tail and body. *When did their old dog Jay-Jay die? Was he still alive in '06? My memory is fading fast.*

Once on the 1st floor deck, Kelvin, a 60-year-old Caucasian dude, originally from Indiana but a longtime Miami resident, sporting a Hulk Hogan mustache, stepped out to welcome us. (I had called ahead.)

“Well now, Mr. Single-Dingle is a party of three,” he said. “Come on in.”

We entered their living room. Angeline, an 81-year-old Caucasian lady from Miami, was leaning against the wall.

“Hello Michael,” she shouted. *Michael? Just like Al Niño.*

“Hello Angeline. Looks like you’re holding up well.”

“Michael, I think you have some introductions to make,” she demanded.

Everyone then said their hellos. I later updated them on my life changes. And then Angeline and Kelvin started telling me about the deaths on the mountain over the past decade: several suicides (one in the mobile home below my old house via a shotgun blast to the face), a pair of drug overdoses, a homicide, an accidental fatality, and a couple of natural old-age passings.

“Want to go for a hike to the point, [the actual High Peak on the USGS topo map] dudes?” Kelvin suddenly blurted. “It’s totally different now. They bulldozed it flat. The rock is gone.”

“Sure,” I said. “We can see the sunset.”

“How long is the walk?” my son asked.

“Just ten minutes,” Kelvin answered.

“It’s an easy walk, guys,” I assured them. “Kelvin and I hiked it numerous times with our dogs.”

“Ok, go on before it gets dark,” Angeline said as she playfully shoed us out of the house.

Soon we, the four us (Angeline is too old for hiking now), were walking northwesterly down the gravel road. My son had brought a plastic (American) football. We began passing it around as we hiked. Kelvin kept trying to catch it with one hand, as he had a drink in his right hand, without much success.

We passed the house on the right where Mitch, a Caucasian Vietnam War veteran, had lived. He ran for county sheriff and lost, but then he won, but then he didn’t take office for some odd reason. Very complicated. Never was sure about the details. He was the first person that I spoke with on a cold post-Christmas December day in 1997. Too many oxies (oxycodone pills) took him out. Laura, now three years a widow, still lived there. However, it seemed very quiet as we passed their residence.

Next house up was the chiropractor from Mocksville's weekend getaway. It had an incredible west-facing view: postcard sunsets over 200 evenings a year. It was vacant now. John, who was also a single-engine pilot, had died of a heart attack about six years ago. His now-widow Jill didn't come up here much anymore according to Kelvin.

Kelvin then led us towards the home. "Let's walk the house's deck perimeter. Jill likes for me to keep an eye on it to make sure that no person or animal has broken in."

"Are you sure that it's ok?" I asked.

"Oh, c'mon," Kelvin quipped.

We all walked to the rear of the house. The view was just as I had remembered: an incredible Appalachian vista.

"I remember having a New Year's Day dinner in this house with the old couple who owned this place before John and Jill," I said. "I think it was 1998. They were very friendly folks. Yeah, it was before you guys got here, Kelvin."

"Yeah, we arrived in late March of '98," Kelvin added. "Just three months after you. And, by the way, that couple is dead now, too."

"What is it with High Peak and dying?" I asked while chuckling.

"It's in the well water," Kelvin then said somewhat stoically.

All looked ok: no broken windows or open doors. We exited the property. Kelvin re-latched the front gate as I stared at

the adjacent radio tower. Then we began the last half of the hike.

There were no more domiciles in the final stretch. Now it was just a dense forest canopy with rhododendron on both sides of the now-ridgeline, hardly ever used, gravel road.

Five minutes later and we were standing on the point. It had been cleared and graded; it was a homesite lot ready for construction. And, man, the view was nonpareil – 220 degrees of Blue Ridge Mountain peaks.

“Why didn’t Franz build his dream home up here?” I asked Kelvin as my son chased after his dog, who challenged him: Tag me if you can!

“Not sure,” Kelvin said. “But, you knew about his son dying a while back in an automobile accident, right?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, I think that screwed up his house plans,” Kelvin said.

“I see,” I sighed and looked to the west.

We had timed it right. The sunset was in a word: awesome.

“You guys see the highest peak out there, the one with the antenna?” I asked Agents 32 and 666. “Well, that’s Mount Pisgah. Elevation is 5,722.” *How does he know that? / Why does dad memorize all these numbers?*

“Are you sure that it’s not 5,725, Agent 33?” Monique asked with a smirk.

“Well, if the Atlantic tide is out, maybe so, Agent 32,” I said.

“Agent 32, Agent 33 ... what the hell have you got going now, dude?” Kelvin asked.

“A clandestine cabal,” I said, suppressing an upwelling bubble of laughter.

Kelvin raised his eyebrows. “An anti-New World Odor [*sic*] campaign?”

“No, nothing like that, Kelvin,” Monique said. “It’s just his silly online art project. It’s called psecret psociety with silent p’s in front of the s’s. It’s on Facebook.”

“Facebook?” Kelvin asked rhetorically. “I think I’ll pass. I’ve got enough problems already in the real world.”

“Are you sure?” I asked Kelvin. “Lots of great prime numbers are still available. Once you have a number, the number has you. It changes the trajectory of your life.” *He must be back to sniffing glue.*

“You sound just like a cult leader,” Kelvin barked. “No thanks. You can keep that Kool-Aid.”

Monique and I laughed. Kirk was getting bored. The dog was sitting down now, all tired-out.

Kelvin turned his gaze to the east-southeast. “And, if you look right through there, you can see your old house,” Kelvin said while pointing through some distant oak trees. “See the shiny metal roof glimmering?”

“Yeah, I see it, Kelvin,” I said. “I never knew that you could see my house from here.”

“That galvanized metal is reflective as hell, and in the mid-afternoon it looks like a giant solar panel,” Kelvin added.

“Can we go back now?” my son meekly asked.

“Sure,” I said as I took one last look at the tremendous twilight scene. *What a homesite this will be for someone ... someone with a four-wheel drive and high ground clearance.*

We hiked back down the gravel road, still occasionally throwing the football around. When we were almost back, Kelvin walked off to the right on a gravel driveway. There was a van-style RV (recreational vehicle) parked in it, which belonged to Angeline.

“You guys are welcome to crash here tonight,” Kelvin said. “There’s no propane, but it has 110-volt electricity. I can bring you a space heater. Tonight’s low will only be 40.” [Fahrenheit; 4.44° Celsius]

We surveyed the inside of the RV. I could immediately tell that my son wasn’t too keen on this idea, as he would have to sleep in a bunk above the windshield.

When Kelvin drifted outside, I lightly touched Monique’s right shoulder. “What do you think, honey?” I asked her quietly.

“I don’t know, bana; [Cebuano for husband] can your back deal with that thin mattress?”

“Probably not,” I said. “We’ll just get a hotel room in Hendersonville. I will tell Kelvin.”

We all ended our tour of the RV and stepped outside. I told Kelvin that my back probably couldn’t make it.

He then announced: “Old man, the back is the first thing to go. Wait until you’re my age.”

I nodded and smiled.

Angeline heard us and came outside. I told her that we would be going into town. We hugged and we said our goodbyes.

We got back in our car and slowly climbed the gravel-crunchy incline. Once at the top, Monique looked over at me.

“You have a question, Agent 32?”

“I do, 33,” she replied. “What exactly is Angeline and Kelvin’s relationship?”

“A platonic, mutualistic one,” I answered.

“What do you mean?” Monique asked.

“Angeline always wanted to live in the North Carolina Mountains. It was a longtime dream. However, she knew that she couldn’t manage at her age in a house up here alone. So, before leaving Miami, she made Kelvin an offer. If he would be the maintenance man, chauffeur, and general caretaker, he could live with her rent-free, all utilities included. And, after a whole quarter-hour of thinking about it,

he decided to take her up on the offer. His bedroom is on the offer side of the house, if you didn't notice. They're like college roommates. Ok, advanced-age college roommates."

"Interesting," Agent 666 said from the back seat. "Very interesting."

Soon we were descending towards my old abode. There were still no cars in the driveway. *Abandoned, just as Kelvin said.*

I stopped and Monique snapped a pic. (See cover photo.)
Why is that light on?

My mind meandered as the engine idled. *I probably slept 1,212 nights in that front bedroom. Exactly 1,212? That alphabet-soup pattern in the vaulted popcorn-stucco ceiling. It spelled out a single word: LOST. What was I expecting to happen by living alone up here? The next great American novel? The next great American visual artist? Some scientific discovery? Some plant-based concoction with sublime highs without any nasty side-effects? I remember smoking moss and elf ears. I've probably shortened my life twenty years. Oh, well. Pretty damn humorous now.*

"Dad? Hello dad!"

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