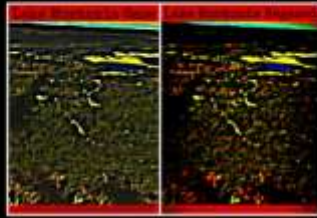


Lake Montonia Gazers



a matching pair
of psecret
psociety pshort
pstories by mike
bozart (33)

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Lake Montonia Gaze by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | FEBRUARY
2017

Lake Montonia Gaze

by Mike Bozart

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On a seasonally cold 2013 winter morning, after gulping down my last slug of coffee, I gave Slim (who never took an agent number) a call from our frosty east Charlotte (NC, USA) back yard (bad cell reception in the basement apartment). Monique, my Filipina wife (Agent 32), was still asleep and not feeling good (a chest cold).

I punched in his new ten digits on my little LG not-that-smart phone. On the third ring he answered.

“Huh-lo,” [*sic*] Slim said, sounding like I had awakened him.

“Hi, Slim. It’s Mike – Mike van Tryke. [my art-name] Want to do a cool-air hike today at Crowders Mountain State Park and reminisce about Frank? [Agent 107, who had died unexpectedly – at 47 – three weeks prior] I think that it will warm up to 45.” [° Fahrenheit; 7.22° Celsius]

“You mean a cold-air hike. I bet that it will struggle to reach 40 [° Fahrenheit; 4.44° Celsius] on the north side of that ridge. But, yeah, sure. I’ve got nothing planned. I just need to do a little house-cleaning first. Want to roll out from my place at noon? I’ll be glad to drive. Just give me a few bucks for gas. I’m low on loot until payday – Friday.”

“Sure! Sounds great, Slim. See you then.”

Monique awoke just after ten o’clock and said that she would be fine without me for the afternoon, as she was just going to rest in bed.

The green minivan rolled onto Slim's gravel Plaza Hills driveway at 11:58 AM. As I strolled up to his front door, I noticed a new M^cMansion on the lot beside him. *Wow! The NoDa [a now-über-trendy area of northeast Charlotte] gentrification wave has crossed The Plaza. I bet the value of Slim's modest two-bedroom house has tripled since he bought it in '89. But, he's not looking to sell. Thus, he's just paying more in property taxes now. I'm sure that he's thrilled.*

I knocked on the thick, wooden, round-top door, as Slim had disabled the doorbell (annoying sound). Eight seconds later, the door was being unlocked.

Slim's now-balding, 51-year-old (2¹/₂ years my senior), bespectacled, black-haired, Caucasian head appeared in the door gap. "I'm all ready to go, Mike." He then stepped onto his gray-painted concrete slab porch.

A stray, medium-size, mixed-breed dog on the street started to approach us aggressively, but Slim yelled it away. Then Slim led the way to his gold-colored 1974 Chevy Camaro.

"Mike, I want to take the old lady out today. I haven't driven her in months. Could you back your car out of the driveway?"

I obliged. Soon we were on the Brookshire Freeway (NC 16), heading northwest away from uptown Charlotte. Slim opened it up a few times, giving the old V-8 engine a stiff dose of throttle.

"Just clearing out her lungs, Mike," he said with his trademark, almost maniacal, grin. *I bet Slim had a few bong*

hits [water-pipe-filtered inhalations of marijuana] for breakfast. Wake-n-bake.

A few minutes later we were motoring down Interstate 85 South (but actually headed more west than south). Slim then inserted a best-of-Journey CD into his high-end, after-factory stereo. He started to sing along when *Wheel in the Sky* came on. *Slim still loves his Journey.*

When we passed over the Catawba River, I started to wonder which access point Slim had in mind for our hike. *Don't want to hike from the Linwood Road parking lot today. Too many people will be out. Won't have any quality Frankenthoughts. [sic] Too many distractions.*

"Slim, what part of the mountain ridge did you want to hike?" I asked as we zoomed past Exit 27 (Belmont).

"Let's hike up to that craggy overlook – the one south of Kings Pinnacle – where I found that roach [the last part of a marijuana cigarette] in the cranny of a boulder." *He just used 'craggy' and 'cranny' in the same sentence. Graggy [sic] granny. Fraggy [sic] Franny.*

"I remember that, Slim. You said that it was RAD – rainwater-advanced dope." *Wrong.*

"No, Mike; I said that it was R-E-D – rainwater-enhanced dope." *My memory is shot. / Mike's memory is fried.*

"Oh, yeah. You're right. That was quite a bizarre find. They must've got so stoned that they dropped it." *Wrong again.*

“No, it wasn’t dropped, Mike. Remember that I removed it from a crack – a cranny – in that large boulder? Someone had strategically placed it there.” *Oh, yes.*

“Maybe Frank pranked us and planted it there when we weren’t looking.” *No, no, no. Gosh, his brain is toast now.*

“No, the roach was stone cold and the paper was weathered. It had been there for at least several days – probably over a week. Don’t you remember?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s coming back, Slim. I have an image of it now on my neural screen.” *Neural screen? Ha!*

“I bet that it was placed there for a reason, Mike.”

“Yeah, the stoners [marijuana smokers] probably didn’t want that two centimeters ($\frac{4}{5}$ of an inch) of evidence in their car. Just not worth the risk.” *His brain can still function after all.*

“Congratulations! That’s the first intelligent thing that you’ve said since you got in the car, Mike.” Slim had a guffaw.

“I still have my moments, Slim. Still keeping senility at bay.”

“Just barely.”

I laughed. And then somber thoughts of Frank shut it down.

We then blew right past Gastonia. Slim had it locked down at 74 MPH (119 km/h) in the far left lane. *Hope we don’t get pulled over. A speeding ticket would send his insurance*

through the roof. He always liked to drive fast – just like Frank. I guess that he knows the leeway limit.

“So, what exit do we take, Slim? Was it Exit 5?”

“No, that’s one too far, Mike. We take Exit 8 for NC 161.”
[aka York Road]

“Oh, yeah; that’s right.”

Just then we were passing through the long Exit 10, which had a section of US 74 sandwiched between the southbound and northbound lanes of Interstate 85.

One hundred seconds later, Slim had slowed down and moved over to the far right lane. We safely exited the freeway and headed south on York Road. We could see the ridge looming ahead. With the leaves off the deciduous trees, we could even see some of the granite outcrops and precipices. *Was that the one?*

As we approached Stepps Gap, where the Ridgeline Trail crosses the highway, I noticed shiny steel guardrails that tightly lined both shoulders. *Well, no parking here.*

“Where are we going to park your muscle-mobile, Slim? The just-off-the-road-on-the-grassy-shoulder parking days are now over.” *He sure is talking oddly. Maybe Mike is already on something.*

“Right here,” Slim said as he suddenly turned right onto a gravel road named Oak Mountain Lane. “See the pink surveyor’s tape on these trees?”

“Yes.” *What in the world is Slim thinking?*

“Pass me the notebook under your seat,” Slim requested as he pulled off the gravel road onto a flat sandy patch.

I felt under the seat and extracted a grade-school spiral notebook. I handed it to Slim as he shifted into Park.

“Also, could you please pass me the magic marker that is in the glove compartment?”

I did so.

“Thanky-thanky.” [*sic*] Slim then wrote *SURVEY CREW* on a lined sheet of paper. Next, he tore it from the notebook and placed it on his dashboard in front of the steering wheel. *What in the world?! Does he expect that to be his free-parking pass?*

“I hope your car doesn’t get towed, Slim. It’s a long walk back to Charlotte. Thirty-eight miles [61.16 km] is a little beyond my range.” *Gosh, he worries too much.*

“Relax. It will be ok, Mike.” *Hope so. But, I sure wouldn’t want to bet on it.*

We then exited his Camaro and began our hike. We backtracked on the gravel road to NC 161. Then we walked

across the highway and picked up the Ridgeline Trail. Soon we were climbing steadily, but not too steeply. In only eleven minutes we had reached the first northwest-facing overlook. I wandered over to check it out.

“This isn’t the one, Mike. It was the third one up. Remember?” *Yep, he’s right.*

“You’ve still got an elephant’s memory, Slim.”

“Only compared to yours, Mike.”

We had a laugh for a few seconds.

About two hundred feet (61 meters) farther was the second rocky overlook. Three Caucasian hikers in their 30s, two females and a male, were taking a water break. We just said hello and kept marching up the ridge.

In another two hundred or so feet, we were at our favorite spot of year’s past: the third perch. Lucky for us, no one was there. I looked at my cell phone as we stepped through a fissure and onto some massive boulders. It was 1:11. The sun was bright and did provide a little extra warmth. Though, the hike itself had already warmed us up.

I found a chair-like feature in the light gray, mostly rounded, granite rocks and sat down. Slim then did likewise. His stone recliner was about six feet (2 meters) to my left.

I then noticed a green pond in the valley below. I pointed down to it. “Slim, there’s Lake Montonia.”

“Oh, yes. I see it.”

“Remember that Monday evening that me, you and Frank came up here, back in the summer of ‘94?” *Back in the summer of ‘69 ...*

“Hmmm ... not sure.”

“The exact date was June 27th.” *Exact date?*

“Why would we have come up here on a Monday in June?”

“I think your electrical controls company had a complete shutdown that week. And, Frank was off work due to a construction accident. I think he partially cut his left thumb with a circular saw. And as for me, I was working from home at the time, writing safety talks.”

“Oh, yes. I was on a forced vacation due to a downturn in that company’s business. That was one lean summer. Glad that I’m not with them anymore. Ok, so what happened? Refresh my memory.”

“And, you said that I had the bad memory, Slim.” I chuckled.

Slim grinned. “Was that the time we stayed up here until nightfall, and then stumbled our way back down the trail in the pitch-black darkness, tripping over roots, because none of us remembered to bring a flashlight?”

“Yes, that would be the night.”

“So, what was so special about that particular outing? That wasn’t the time that I found the hidden roach.”

“Yeah, I know that. But, remember the swimmers in Lake Montonia that evening? They were splashing around and hooting and hollering so loud that we could make out their conversation up here.”

“Ok, I think that I recall it now.”

“And then, remember that loud scream just after eight o’clock, around dusk?”

“Oh, yes! That was one blood-curdling scream. So, what about it, Mike?”

“Well, it turns out that that scream was related to an 18-year-old male’s serious accident in that swimming hole.”

“You’re kidding me. What happened?”

“Dude slid down the water slide on his knees, toppled over at the end, and then his head struck a submerged section of concrete. A lawsuit ensued that wound through the courts for several years.”

“Was he paralyzed?”

“I’m not sure.”

“How much money did he get?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Can you reply with something other than ‘I’m not sure’?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Boo. Enough. Stop. Please.”

“Hey, you set me up, Slim. I had to say it a third time.” *On the third perch.*

Slim then fired up a joint (a marijuana cigarette) and began to take some deep drags on it. After the fifth inhalation, he handed it towards me.

I declined. “That’s ok, Slim. I’d like to take a puff, but they now have drug testing where I work. I’ll just stir a few of my magic granules into my water bottle. It’s totally legal, fast-acting, mildly psychedelic, and only lasts three hours. But, boy does it uncap the thought pipeline.” *Uncap the thought pipeline?*

“Got enough for me, too?”

“Sure, Slim. I anticipated your interest.”

I then poured a teaspoon of the blue-green granules into mine and Slim’s water bottles. We both gulped down the solution at the same time.

“Here’s to our fantastic Frank!” I announced as I finished off the half-liter (16.9 oz.) bottle.

“Wherever he may be,” Slim added, right on cue.

We were silent for seventeen minutes as the psychoactive serum took hold of our neural circuitry. Then a chilly gust of wind whistled through the scraggly pines that were desperately trying not to be blown off the rocks.

“What do ya think, Slim? Just atoms?” *What?! He’s already zapped. Hope he doesn’t fall off this cliff.*

“Atoms?” Slim asked, seeking elaboration.

“Atoms. Molecules. And then after we die, everything moving to a lower energy state.”

“You mean the corpse?”

“Yes, and everything associated with the deceased one’s brain – all the thoughts, memories, concepts of self, etc.”

“Ok, I think that I see where you’re going. What really happens after we die? What is verifiable? Entropy wins out against even us humans. Is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s what seems to be tingling my synapses right now, Slim. How about you?”

“I’m getting thoughts of existences in alternate universes after death. Frank may be laughing at us right now from his sixth-dimension perch.”

“A wormhole with a view.”

We both started laughing uproariously, gasping for oxygen. Twenty-two seconds later, I had caught my breath. Slim

recomposed himself five seconds subsequent, just before a pack of hikers walked by. *Whe w!*

“Slim, what do you think led to Frank’s apparent suicide?”

“That is the unsolvable riddle, Mike.”

“Some say it was financial; others say it was medical; and still others think it was relationship related. But, I blame it on the Ambien[®]. Those pills made him paranoid as hell and completely delusional.”

“You may be right, Mike. If I had to assign a probability to these different theories, I would score it like this: Financial, 5% – his store was making money; medical, 30% – he did complain of chronic back pain, but was it really *that* bad?; relationship reasons, 20% – he had just celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas with Sally and his family, and there were no signs of discord; Ambien[®], 90% – I saw him, too, acting very strange on that stuff.”

“I’ve never taken Ambien[®], Slim, but I’ve read the horror stories on the internet. You know, in some ways it seems a lot like Marezine[®], that over-the-counter motion-sickness preventative. If you took more than six of those tablets, you could slide into an intensely, incredibly real-like unreality. You could easily imagine certain people were present – in hiding – who really weren’t.”

“It will always be a mystery, I guess.”

“Yep, probably so. And, no note was left, Slim.”

“Well, with Frank that doesn’t surprise me, Mike. You know that he was a man of few words – spoken or written.”

“That’s the truth. Maybe it was a combination of everything, and he just said to himself: “That’s it. Enough. Done. I’m out of here. You guys sort through it without me.”

“He sure left a void.”

“No doubt, Slim.”

“I wonder if ... he’s aware ...”

Suddenly, a mighty gust of Canadian air ripped across the bluff’s rock face.

“I think our Frank just exhaled, Slim.” *Our frank and open, deep conversations ...*

We laughed for a while. Then we focused on Lake Montonia again. I thought that I saw ripples on the surface. But, then I doubted my posterized perception. *I’m too far away to see surface features on that pond way down there.*

“I’m pondering on that pond,” Slim stated. *A grand day for it.*

“Ok.” *Slim is zonked on my magic granules.*

“Exactly how many people have sat on these rocks over the years, and wondered about their own mortality, Mike?” *Huh?*

“That question costs too much for a near-pauper like me to answer, Slim.” *Costs too much to answer?*

We then got lost in our hyper-spatial thoughts for about an hour. Not much was said. Hikers passed by and we just waved and smiled.

Then I blurted out: "Let's make a deal, Slim. Whichever one of us outlives the other ... well, that person must come up here and eulogize the other two while gazing at Lake Montonia." *Eulogize? Oh, boy ...*

"Well, Mike, that person will most likely be you, Mr. Vegetarian Cyclist."

"I don't know, Slim. I've got some medical issues. Some worsening medical issues."

"Well, go see a doctor!"

"I have."

"Well, what is it?"

"GI tract issues." *Huh?*

"GI tract?"

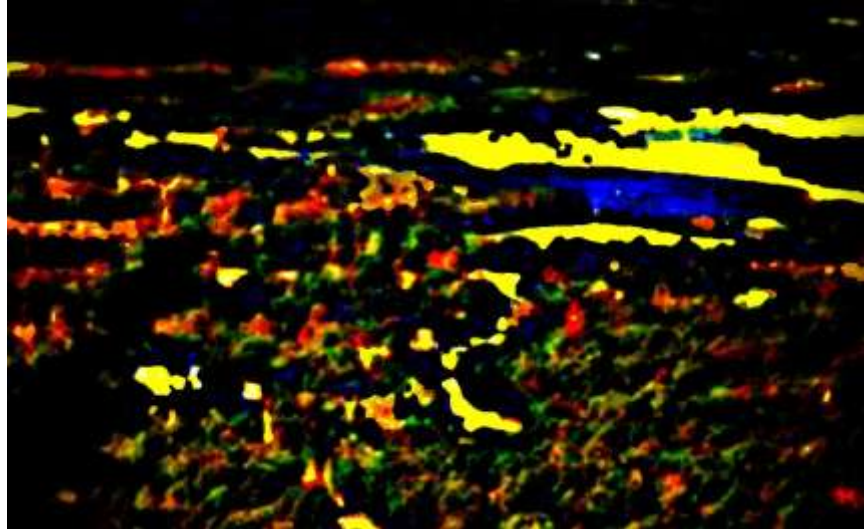
"Gastrointestinal tract."

"Just pour some Drano[®] (pipe clog cutter) down your hatch."

"And then hang glide into Lake Montonia?"

Slim chortled. "Go out on a high note!"

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Lake Montonia Regazed by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) |
FEBRUARY 2017

Lake Montonia Regazed

by Mike Bozart

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On a rare as of late, seasonally cold, frosty February 2017 Sunday morning, I spied Monique, my sexy Filipina wife (Agent 32), reading a previous short story (like this one) on our ancient Dell Inspiron laptop computer in our basement bedroom in east Charlotte (NC, USA).

“Which one are you reading, mahal?” [love in Tagalog] I asked as I searched for our tablet computer. *Maybe it's under one of these pillows.*

“The title is *Lake Montonia Gaze*, Parkaar.” [my ailing alias]

“Oh, that's a recent one,” I said as I sat down on the side of our queen-size bed.

“Can I ask you a few questions, Agent 33?” *Recording time.*

“Sure, charmingly inquisitive Agent 32. I've had my morning cup o' java. Some nascent brainwaves are oscillating now.” *He said that for the recorder. I just know he did.*

“Question number one: Why do you have to put ‘my ailing alias’ in brackets – in every story – after I call you Parkaar?”

“Because we may have a new reader – a keen new reader, no less, in our niche of a niche – who still may be completely oblivious to my quasi-Flemish sobriquet. That's also why I have to state that you are Agent 32, a cute Filipina with a codename of Monique, in every installment. Each one of these short stories needs to be stocked as a stand-alone tale.” *Stocked? As a what?*

“A stand-alone tail? Just an ending with no body?” *Ending with nobody? Hope not.*

“Well, yeah, something like that, I guess.” *He guesses?*

“Ok, enough of that; let’s move on, Parkaarazzi. [sic] Question two: Why do you have to put in all of these metric conversions? Is it really necessary?”

“Because, believe it or not, we have some non-American readers, who probably think that Fahrenheit is some strange mental disorder, and that feet only go into socks and shoes.” *He’s obviously babbling for the future transcript now.*

Monique was unfazed. She cleared her throat. “Question three: You show the thoughts of people – like me – in italics; but, how in the world do you know that that is what we are, or were, really thinking, 33?” *That that.*

“I assumed that you approved the drafts, Monique. As for the others, the real and not-so-real ones, well, I’ve honed in on their neural proclivities by employing Markov chains. I know their beans. Ok, maybe I enjoyed some literary license.” *Literary license?*

“If a license were required to write, I think that you would be in big trouble, Agent 33.” *Yep.*

“Maybe so, maybe sow.” *I wonder how he spelled that second one. Guess I’ll see in about a week.*

Monique continued the interrogation as if she were in a court proceeding. “Question four: Why do you use *sic* in brackets? I’m not an English major, but isn’t that just for nonfiction?”

“Well, we’re forging forth with a new genre, Agent 32 – hyper-technical meta-fiction. It’s a requirement with all of the odd spellings and peculiar phrasings. Must separate the puns from the errant runs. Some mis-takes [*sic*] are lovingly intentional.” *I’ve heard enough.*

“Ok, that’s it. I can’t take any more of this nonsense.” *Is it that annoying?*

“Oh, come on, Monique by the Creek. [the title of a misplaced short story] One more question, adorable Agent 32. Reload and fire away.” *A way or a whey?*

Monique shifted her pink-camisole torso in the swivel-type desk chair. “Ok, question five – the final one at that: What is the purpose of these short stories, Agent 33?” *Let’s go deep and long with this one.*

“Hmmm ... Ok, here we go. Imagine, if you will, that you are an ant on a drone, Agent 32, and – ” *What?!*

“An ant?! I don’t want to be no stinking ant.” *And, wouldn’t an ant get blown off?*

“Well, these drones can’t fly with more than a quarter-ounce [7.09 grams] of additional weight. That’s not much of a payload. You’ll have to pick a very lightweight creature,

which narrows it down to insects and spiders.” *Spiders? Yuck! No way!*

“Can’t I just be the built-in camera on the drone?”

“The camera can’t think. Well, at least not yet. At this juncture, you’ll have to go bio-something, Monique.”

“Ok, I’ll be a ladybug.”

“Good choice. So, there you are Miss Ladybug –” *Nope.*

“Stop! Backtrack. I’m a married ladybug, bana. [husband in Cebuano] Or, did you conveniently forget?” *Whoops!*

“How could I ever forget, mahal?” *You just did.*

“I’m sure that two ladybugs weigh less than a quarter of an ounce, Parkaar. Thus, restart your longwinded answer with me right beside you on that drone.”

“Ok, so there we are – two ladybugs safely micro-strapped onto the nosecone of this high-quality, cutting-edge – well, by today’s standards – chalk-white drone.”

“Where is this drone? What are we flying over?”

“Yes, yes, yes. Well, I was just getting to that, Agent 32.”

Monique then sneezed. “I’m ok. Continue, Agent 33.”

“We are hovering at – oh, let’s say, thirty feet [9.14 meters] or so – above Lake Montonia on a nice autumn day.”

“Any humans below us, 33?”

“No, no humans below, 32. We don’t have to worry about being taken down by gunshot. Well, at least not yet.” *But, later?*

“Ok, so what happens next, Parkaar?”

“Monique, as we are gazing at the tranquil surface of Lake Montonia in ladybug form, the drone shifts into high gear, and begins to head towards the ridge.”

“Towards Kings Pinnacle, 33?”

“Just a little southwest of there, 32.”

“Ok, this is the craziest answer ever to a simple question. But, please do continue, Agent 33. Though, let’s not crash into the treetops.”

“Exactly, 32. We don’t halve [*sic*] time to crash.” *Did he say ‘have’ or ‘halve’? Oh, I’ll just let it go.*

“So, what are we two ladybugs thinking about while planted on this drone, as it speeds towards the mountain ridge?”

“Well, that’s a tough call to answer, astute Agent 32. It’s inchoate and indecipherable, and we don’t want to give the story away too soon. But, as we quickly approach the granite outcrops, we now see –.” *A gruesome fate, I’m sure.*

“A large hawk swooping down to rip the drone to shreds in its razor-sharp talons. Am I right?” *She’s already seen too many American horror flicks.*

“A bit less menacing, Agent 32. There are some gentle people sitting on the rocks.” *Gentle people with shotguns?*

“Can we make out who these *gentle* people are? Do we know them?”

“Yes, we certainly do. As the drone zooms in closer, the two people on that cliff look a whole lot like – drumroll, please – us!” *Us? What in the freaking world?!*

“I thought we were two ladybugs on a drone.” *A song title there.*

“We were! And now, well, we’re back in human form enjoying a fall afternoon on the ridge as the distant Interstate 85 traffic whizzes by unaware of the drone that is now drifting backwards and crashing into Lake Montonia. Yes, it looks like we switched off just in time. That drone had a low charge. It was never going up and over.” *Oh, brother.*

“That’s your complete and final answer to question five, Parkaarobfuscatti?” [*sic*]

“Complete and final? Now, we never want to use those kinds of adjectives on an indeterminate flight of fancy.” *Fancy?*

“Don’t you mean fantasy, Agent 33?”

“Fancy fantasy on the cheap.” *Oh, my kano! [Filipino slang for American]*

“Ok, one last question, Parkaaroni.” [sic]

“Sure, Agent 32. Random is fine.” *Will this be question six?*

“Question 5(a): Who is/was controlling the drone in your little vignette of a reply, Agent 33?”

“Why, Ernie the electronic earwig, of course. Who else! Monique, please tell me that you knew that.”

“Ok, that’s enough.”

<click>