



North Coast Tales

a dectet of short stories

by Mike Bozart

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another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Eureka! by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | DECEMBER 2016

Eureka!

by Mike Bozart

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Manuel Oscar Ortiz, a 26-year-old, struggling Hispanic American actor, opened the coffee-stained, crumpled, dingy, return-address-less envelope in his cramped and cluttered East Hollywood (California, USA) studio apartment. The three o'clock December sunlight slithered through the old Venetian blinds into his kitchenette and illuminated the sheet of notebook paper. He read softly aloud:

Man, oh Manuel! Yes, finally, 'Daring' has successfully formulated Mysterium! [sic] And boy does it enhance neurotransmission inside our 3-pound [1.36 kg] intracranial jelly lobes - our brains. Dude, I inhaled a big blast last week, and let me tell you, I'll never be the same. No, I haven't become a homicidal rapist, but I have become painfully aware of humankind's fate. I won't spoil it for you; I'll let you 'see' for yourself. You won't believe it! Anyway, since I no longer trust USPS, [United States Postal Service] I hid a small container for you in Eureka. [California, USA] Let me close with these clues for discovery:

- *from the Canadian Atlantic he came*
- *easier to fell trees than find gold*
- *Queen Anne would be proud*
- *waterfront is worth the walk*
- *where the rain trickles out, I put it in*
- *on a line between turret and sign*

Manuel then carefully folded the note back into thirds and re-inserted it into the right-edge-torn-off envelope. As he held it in his right hand, his mind began to race. *I wonder who sent this. Probably Charles. Yeah, it has to be Charles. He's too paranoid to own or even use a cell phone. That's why he sent this letter anonymously. I wonder if there's anything to this Mysterium stuff. Charles claims that he's seen the fate of humankind. What an outlandish remark! But, that's just like Charles. Well, I probably won't have any work this weekend. Maybe jump a flight up to Arcata. Yeah, why not?*

Next Saturday morning found Manuel at LAX (Los Angeles International Airport), boarding an Alaska Airlines flight with just a backpack. Once in his window seat in the middle of the coach section of the Boeing 737, he looked at the cracks in the tarmac. His mind meandered. *Have to go to PDX [Portland International Airport] first. A nonstop would have been nice, but it's just too expensive on short notice. Well, the extra time can be used to start deciphering the clues in that letter. Oh crap! Where is the letter?! [It was in his left hand.] Oh, there it is. Gosh, that letter has got me so hyped-up that I'm losing my mind. Need to relax. I wonder how impressive that Mysterium mist is. Hope I can find it. Clue 1: 'from the Canadian Atlantic he came'. That could be any one of a hundred thousand gents. Hmmm Let's start with the third clue, a proper noun – Queen Anne. Let's do a Google search on Queen Anne and Eureka, California together. Bingo! The old Carson Mansion. The first two clues further confirm this. But, what does the fourth clue – 'waterfront is worth the walk' – happen to mean? I'll just get a hotel room near that Victorian mansion and find out this afternoon.*

The flight to Portland was relaxingly uneventful, save for a small boy who lost his tiny toy under his seat. Once inside the south terminal, Manuel went to a newsstand that proudly stated that they sold 'everything from porn to granola bars'. He drifted over to the map section as Nick Lowe's *Christmas at the Airport* suffused the dusty air from a ceiling-tile speaker. A cute, petite, raven-haired Latina in her early 20s looked at Manuel and smiled. *Well, there's an opening. Should I talk to her? I'm single once again. Hell, why not?*

He walked up to her, feeling insouciantly assure of himself. "Did you find something to read?" he asked prosaically, sounding a bit tired.

"No, they don't have the romance novel that I'm looking for," she said, sensing his interest in her ... or her body.

"Which novel is that?" Manuel asked, and then realized that he might be prying. *Romance novels can be like porn for women. Why am I asking her for the title? I wouldn't know it anyway. Would she ask me for the title of my favorite porn site? Let's wake up, boy. / He sure is feeling bold.*

"The title is *Kathy's Barbarian*. It's girly stuff." *I am sure that it is. / I wonder if he's a speedy pumper.*

“Would the barbarian in that novel happen to be named Ingomar?” *Huh? Ingomar? What a name!*

“No, I don’t think so. Why?”

“Oh, it’s a long story,” Manuel said with a slight sigh. *I need to hear it.*

“Tell me this long story over a tall cup of coffee, mister. I’ve got twenty minutes to kill. There’s a coffee shop next door.” *Hard to pass up an offer like this. She’s very cute and incredibly sexy. Just don’t tell her about the Mysterium.*

“Ok, sure. Why not?”

“Exactly! Why not? There’s no harm in it.” *I hope not.*

They then moseyed over to the espresso stand, ordered and took opposing seats at a 4-top table.

“Oh, by the way, my name is Lucia.” She then put her large brown handbag down in the chair beside her.

“I’m Manuel. Do you speak Spanish?” *I guess that I look more Hispanic than I thought.*

“Hardly any. I’m second generation. My family came to San Diego [California, USA] from Guatemala back in the 1980s.”

“I see. My roots go back to Costa Rica. I attended Humboldt State University in Arcata – studied acting. I’m headed back to Eureka now.” *Another movie-star wannabe.*

“Going to link up with the old college gang and burn a few blunts?” [hollowed-out cigars filled with marijuana]

“Uh, no, just going back for old time’s sake.” *That’s a lie. He would suck as a politician.*

“Oh, stop with the coyness, hombre. [man in Spanish] You’re going back there to bang your old girlfriend. Am I right?” *Wow! Why did I have to start talking to this woman? Must not be like that David character in ‘Gold, a summer story’. [the 2013 novel by yours truly] Should have never struck up a conversation with her. Need to watch my tongue.*

“No, nothing like that. So, where are you off to?” *He’s quite evasive. Something is up. It’s obvious. I should track his sly ass. I’ll drop a GPS [Global Positioning System] chip on him.*

“Actually, I’m flying down to Santa Rosa to visit a college friend. She graduated from San Diego State last May.”

“I see.” *Is she lesbian? If so, she’s definitely the femme.*

“Flying to Portland saved me \$300.”

“Same with me. I’m just here for the price break. I like Portland, though. Last time I was here, things got pretty wild.” *I’m sure.*

“You were going to tell me about Ingomar.” *Be vague.*

“A brutish fellow, I’m afraid.” *It’s useless.*

“Well, I’ve got to go now. Nice talking with you, Manuel. Safe travels.” *I’d love to see her again.*

“Likewise, Lucia. Take care.”

She then got up and walked behind him. His bright yellow backpack was almost completely zipped. Almost.

They both got on their respective flights without incident. Lucia landed in northwest Santa Rosa at 2:39 PM. Manuel had already landed at ACV (Arcata-Eureka Airport) in McKinleyville at 1:43 PM. The weather was much nicer in Santa Rosa: mostly cloudy and 59° (Fahrenheit; 15° Celsius); it was nonstop drizzle and 48° (Fahrenheit; 9° Celsius) on the Humboldt County coast.

Manuel took an uber (ride-sharing car) to the Town House Motel, a modest inn at 4th and K. He and the 30-something, red-bearded, brown-haired driver were silent the whole way until he stepped out of the car. That’s when the uber driver solemnly announced: “Good luck going forward.” *Do I really look down on my luck?*

Manuel got a room on the upper floor of the two-story building. He quickly settled on the queen-size bed and took a nap. When he awoke an hour later, it was still raining and quite gray. *I’ll search for that Mysterium first thing in the morning. The rain will have moved out by then.*

At 7:05 AM, Manuel jumped out of bed feeling refreshed. He actually had a good night’s sleep on the budget-motel bed. After a quick shower and coffee, he was out the door. The sun was rising over the southeastern ridges at 7:31. *This is going to be a life-changing day. I just know it.*

Manuel started walking north on K Street. The sidewalks were vacant. When he crossed Opera Alley, K Street became a brick walkway. And when he emerged at 2nd Street, he looked right and saw it: the impressive Carson Mansion towering just two blocks away. *Wow! What an edifice. That dude was the kingpin of the village. I wonder how he treated his workers.*

He walked up to the short, black, wrought-iron fence that ran along the property's perimeter. He stopped to read the letter from Charles again. *Clue 4: 'waterfront is worth the walk'. Well, the waterfront side is that way. The street down there is even named Waterfront Drive. Yeah, I need to go this way.*

Manuel turned left and walked to the end of M Street. There he stepped over the barricade and waded through a sea of shrubbery. Then he came to the top of a concrete retaining wall that was six to seven feet (two meters) high. He leapt down successfully. The soft earth prevented an ankle sprain. He looked at the slatted, yard-tall (about a meter high) beach fence just in front of him that ran along Waterfront Drive. *I've got myself into some kind of no-man's land. Hope a cop doesn't drive by. Where to go now? Clue 5: 'where the rain trickles out, I put it in'.*

Manuel looked back at the Victorian-on-steroids manor. He could only see the rooftop peaks and spires. Then his eyes drifted down to the seepage outlets in the retaining wall, from where water oozed out and dripped down. *Ah, these holes in this wall allow the rainwater to leak out. I bet that Mysterium container is in one of them. But, which one? Clue 6: 'on a line between turret and sign'. Hmmm ... Which sign?*

He continued walking in the lush, grassy strip until he saw a green sign to the left that read: KEEP DOGS ON LEASH

Manuel then looked back at Carson Mansion. He saw the main turret. *Maybe this is the line. Maybe it's in the hole right up there. Hope it didn't get washed away by yesterday's deluge. I guess it might be on the ground now.*

He slowly walked up to the suspected seepage hole, searching the overgrown grass as he advanced. Once at the rectangular hole in the wall, he ducked down and looked in. There was a small, black, plastic spray bottle inside. *Eureka! I've found it.*

Manuel gently extricated it from the soggy earth and fine gravels. The spray bottle had a security-sealed clear cap. On the bottom, the word *Mysterium* was in raised, thin-font letters in a spiral pattern. *Wow! This is it! I have actually found it. Can't wait to take a mighty blast. Should I do it right here? No, just do it in the safety of the hotel room, you fool. Who knows how long it lasts? You don't want to become discombobulated in this private planting strip. Don't want to alight in the town jail.*

He then turned back to face the channel known as Inner Reach and Woodley Island beyond it. A red sedan was stopped on the curb of Waterfront Drive. An unmistakable Latina was staring right at him. *Oh, gosh! It's her – Lucia. Holy crap! How in the world did she follow me here? Did she see me grab the bottle? How long has she been there?*

"Come on, Manuel; get in," Lucia entreated.

Manuel walked up to the passenger-side window. "How did you tail me?"

"Never mind. That's not important right now. Just get in and we'll go back to your motel room and get properly reacquainted. I couldn't let you get away. We're going places, baby." She winked at him and salaciously licked her lips. *She knows where I'm staying? Baby? Is she psycho?*

Manuel slowly opened the car door and crawled in. "So, you planted a tracking bug on me. Is this your usual dating technique? How long have you been doing this, Lucia?"

"We'll discuss it at the motel," she said sans emotion.

They remained silent for the final three blocks. *She's nuts.*

Lucia parked the rental car under the second floor. She then walked with Manuel up to his room. When Manuel opened the door, he was instantly conked by a long-handled rubber mallet and rendered unconscious.

He awoke 28 minutes later with a splitting headache. Both the *Mysterium* and Lucia were long gone. However, his wallet was untouched. *Ouch! What train hit me?*

Five weeks later, back at his humble East Hollywood abode, Manuel was scanning the in-state articles on a weird news website. A familiar photo was next to this shocking headline:

San Diego Woman Claims Humans Extinct by 3000

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Trinidad Head by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | JUNE 2017

Trinidad Head

by Mike Bozart

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The date was June 4, 2017 and the temperature was 50° (Fahrenheit; 10° Celsius). After walking just .4 miles (.64 km) under an overcast sky from the Trinidad (CA, USA) RTS (Redwood Transit System) bus stop on Main Street (next to a Chevron gasoline station), Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) arrived at a 5-star panorama of Trinidad Bay on Edwards Street (at Hector Street) that was postcard material to the max. Anchored fishing boats and erosion-defying sea stacks speckled the harbor. Yes, it was a Humboldt County Chamber of Commerce enticement all the way to Pilot Rock. Beyond that, well, it was hard to see. We savored this breathtaking scene for a few minutes, availing the wooden bench between two restaurant signs.

"It's like a living nautical oil painting," I told Monique. *Hubby loves this place.*

"It's magnificent," she replied. *Indeed.*

We then made our descent to the middle-aged-female-Eurekan-recommended Seascape Restaurant for a Sunday brunch. The mixed-race hostess seated us at a table that had a view of Little Head, a towering angular chunk of metamorphosed gabbro.

Monique noticed me studying the monolith as we waited for our waiter. "You want to climb that, don't you, Parkaar?" [my ailing alias] *I just know he does. He's almost 53, but thinks he's 23.*

"Well, it does look tempting, Agent 32." *He's recording. / Frank [deceased Agent 107] would do it. I know he would.*

"I wouldn't advise it," our short-blond-haired, left-eared, early-20-something, assumed college student, wry-grinning waiter suddenly said as he approached on my right. "It's even steeper and more dangerous than it looks, guys. That old rock stays damp; it's always slippery. A dude fell off it last year and got cracked-up pretty bad. If you want to do some hiking with spectacular views, do Trinidad Head, instead. It has an awesome looping trail that is much safer." *Trinidad? Hmmm ... That's Spanish for Trinity: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And, this holey toast. Sure could go for a pint of 8 Ball Stout. Wholly Lost Coast. Ah, yes, they've got it! Boss begs to boast. They have seafood chowder, too. Gus got the ghost. Looks like a largely liquid*

early lunch for me. Mark marked the most. Wonder what Monique wants. / Yey! They have fried shrimp and scallops.

“Thanks for the warning and sage advice,” I said as I put my menu down. *Ground or rubbed? Round or grubbed?*

“No problem,” he replied. “So, where are you guys from?”

“Charlotte,” Monique blurted.

“Woah!” he exclaimed. “North Carolina. You guys are far, far away from home.”

“Twenty-nine hundred miles,” [4,667 km] I affirmed. “We’ve been staying in Eureka for the past two nights.”

“Ah, Tweakerville,” [sic] he announced. *Huh?*

Monique looked puzzled. “What is a tweaker?”

“A meth-head,” [methamphetamine addict] the knit-shirted waiter answered. “Speed freaks.”

“Oh, yes, we saw plenty of them in Old Town,” I added.

“They’re like cockroaches – so creepy and so freaking annoying,” Monique opined.

“But, unlike cockroaches, they come at you instead of fleeing,” I clarified.

“Yeah, the nonstop bummerama [sic] can be quite a drag,” he synopsisized. *Bummerama? / Nice neologism. A writer?*

“Bummerama – that’s funny,” Monique chimed. *Bummerazzi.*

“Most of them are opioid addicts as well,” he disclosed. “They usually just harm each other. They’re always getting into stupid arguments and fights with themselves. This is why I haven’t gone to Old Town in years.”

“It sure seems to have potential, though,” I suggested.

“My Native American friend’s dad grew up in Eureka,” [23 miles (37 km) south of Trinidad] he stated as he gazed at my UNCC (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) 49ers patch on my green polyester shirt. “He said that Old Town has sucked for four decades. ‘Maybe it gets better next year’ is the semi-official mantra.” *Semi-official mantra? Yeah, he’s a writer, too. Choose your words wisely.*

We finally ordered our drinks and food. While waiting for our waiter's return, I slipped a *Gold* card (a cardstock coupon for a free download of my risqué, noir-esque, 2013 e-novel *Gold, a summer story*) through a slit in the wooden wall planks. *Wonder when someone discovers it. A decade from now? Two? Will this place still even be here? Will a tsunami have washed it away? Will I be dead? Fifty-fifty odds. R-I-P, Mr. Zappa.*

Monique looked at me and shook her head. "Delayed discovery may be fine if you have time, but you don't, Parkaaroni Wankeroni." [sic] *She's already on her game.*

"I know, I know, I know. I'll leave the waiter one with the tip, asawa." [wife in Tagalog and Cebuano]

Our drinks soon arrived. Monique had her now-becoming-customary Sprite® with ice. My chilled porter was almost as good as off the tap at the brewpub on 4th Street (US 101 South) between H and G Streets in downtown Eureka.

"This is really nice, isn't it, mahal?" [love in Tagalog] I asked my raven-haired pinay (Filipina) wife.

"I really love this cool weather with no scorching sun, bana. [husband in Cebuano] Great pick, 33!"

"Yeah, I like it, too. Nice castle weather – the kind we crave."

A Latino family of four were sitting at the table across the aisle. Their exuberant young boy squirmed up to the window sill to see something. He then pointed and muttered something in Spanish. Then his dad plucked him from the table and reseated him. *Wonder what he saw. Was it that column of seagulls? / Bana is spacing out.*

Our food arrived nine minutes later. The creamy soup was tasty. Monique devoured her breaded seafood.

The energetic waiter returned just as we finished eating. "Anything else? Maybe some dessert?"

"All good here," I answered.

"No more for me," Monique replied.

"Well, enjoy your day. You guys just up here for pleasure?"

"We're on a mission – a nebular mission," I told him.

“Have you heard of psecret psociety?” Monique asked him. “It’s spelled with silent p’s. I’m Agent 32 and he’s Agent 33.” *Announcing Ernie the electronic earwig would be too much. Yeah, let it go.*

The 5’-8” (172.72 cm) waiter looked confused. “No, I haven’t.”

“Trust me, man; it’s not important,” I said with a half-laugh.

He smiled and walked away with an uncertain-about-these-two look. *Leave no coast unscathed. / Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned psecret psociety and agent numbers. Maybe he now thinks that we’re part of something unsavory.*

Once outside the modest restaurant, we ventured out on the almost-vacant concrete fishing pier known as Trinidad Wharf. Monique took some pics of the slate-blue bay, capturing Prisoner Rock and the more distant Flat Rock. Then she wanted to position me for a snapshot.

“Move to your right a little, Parkaar. I want to get one of you in front of Little Head.” *Avoid thinking with the little head.*

After she snapped the photo, I pointed to the verdant Trinidad Head, which was only 200 feet (61 meters) across a small cove. “Well, mahal, that’s the waiter-suggested hiking area.” *Kind of looks like a piece of Ireland. / Looks very strenuous.*

“We’re going to the top of that?!” Monique looked horrified.

“No, the very top is off-limits to interloping interlocutors like us. The tossed-down-belt trail winds around at mid-girth.” *He said that for the recorder.*

“Ok then, lead the way, Art Z. Sportzee.” *She said that for the recorder.*

We walked back up Bay Street to Lighthouse Road. There we made a left onto a narrow, vehicle-restricted, paved lane that passed by a loose-sand parking lot in front of a sparsely occupied, northwest-facing, finely ground, gray beach. After walking 700 feet (213 meters) and rising about a hundred feet (30 meters), there was a sharp turn to the left. To the right a hiking trail began. We took it. *Well, here goes. Hope we don’t have any health issues. / Are there poisonous snakes on this rock? Sure hope not.*

The flora was mostly maritime chaparral. The often dense, hedge-like, mainly manzanita shrubbery was up to eight feet (2.56 meters) tall. We soon rounded the northeast corner of the massive domed prominence. And then, boy oh boy, the NNW wind was howling. It must have been about 30 MPH (48 km/h).

We took a break. Soon we were being passed by a late-50-something couple. The Amerasian-appearing man was in jeans and sweatshirt. The Caucasian woman was in a pink jogging outfit. We exchanged nods and waves. *Wonder what their story is. Probably won't see them ever again. / They seem nice.*

Two minutes later we started scaling the first switchback. We took another short break in the upper hairpin bend. *Whew! Haven't hiked like this in ages, and my body is letting me know. / Hope Monique doesn't faint. Don't rush her. We're on no schedule. The whole day is open. At least until the last bus to Arcata. [15 miles (24 km) south] 4:29? Darn! Forgot to bring a water bottle for her.*

The well-worn trail leveled out after that. We then came upon a spur trail. However, Monique wasn't interested in making the hike longer. Thus, we continued on the loop trail, passing under an arch in the lush canopy.

The next flora feature was what can best be described as a cave in the thicket. It was off to our left. I peered inside, half expecting to see a homeless person in the dark chamber. But, no one was in there. *This would be an interesting place to throw down a sleeping bag and spend a night. Some surreal thoughts would surely ensue. / I bet he's thinking of sleeping in there. No freaking way!*

I looked back at Monique.

"The answer is No!" *She read my mind.*

"Not even a nap, mahal?"

"No. Final answer."

I grinned at her. *Why does he want to sleep in there? Who knows what dangerous animals live in there? Kano loko. [crazy American' in Filipino]*

In a few minutes we were looking at a carved-into-a-square-wooden-post sign for another spur off to the right. Eleven

seconds later a husky, ball-capped, navy-blue-jacket-clad, caramel-brown-mustachioed Caucasian guy in his mid-40s came marching up the branch trail towards us.

“How long is this trail?” I asked as he passed.

“Maybe seventy-five feet [23 meters] at most,” he replied. “It goes to a craggy overlook with an incredible view.” *Craggy? Is everyone a writer up here?*

“Ok, thanks,” I said.

He then resumed his hike on the loop trail.

“Well, asawa, want to check it out?”

“Sure, honey. I can tack on another 150 feet.” *150? Huh? Oh, 75 x 2. Forgot the return distance. Wake up!*

The spur trail was an easy walk. Well, until the last twenty feet (six meters). We were glad to be hands-free. *Slip not.*

After safely negotiating a four-point scramble, we were there. And, there was it. The view wasn't incredible; it was beyond incredible. We could see the waves below crashing into the flocks of rocks. Nearest and notably, Blank Rock was getting blanketed by marshmallow-cream seafoam, which streamed southward like Portuguese man o' war tentacles, blown by the fierce Aleutian wind. To starboard, Flatiron Rock was frenetically fending off the attacking sea and had no time for heat-transfer LFC (Liverpool Football Club) crest badges. And, way over in College Cove, Pewetole Island was getting a full facial to ease last September's forehead burn, whether desired or not. Moreover, all of their stoned-in-place cousins were getting a jolly cold splash. Then the fog bell abruptly clanged. *If an 8.0-magnitude seismic jolt toppled this rock and ended it all right here and now, I'd call it a bargain – a way-more-than-fair deal for me. Actually I'd be way ahead. So very lucky to have experienced so much with my shunted hydrocephalic bean. Wonderful wife. Sly son. Yet, all those tragic lives shortened by fatal diseases. Or birth defects. And, all those accidental deaths. All those innocents murdered. How does it figure into the grand equation? So many early exits. Why? How does it fit into the cosmic scheme? Is there one? Way beyond my faulty neural circuitry. There's something about this existence. Something not to be fully trusted. An amoral merciless process. But, wow! So marvelously majestic. Yeah, this is the pictorial*

definition. What a place in time. The scene will look about the same tomorrow. Most likely. What does it mean to see it today – right now? What if we were here yesterday? Ok, so what? The weather was similar. It would be about the same. But, the people encountered would be different. Oh, why do I think such nonsense? Maybe I'm going mad. Ha! One sure must make a lot of loot to live in coastal California. And, wouldn't you know it, that's only where the cool, foggy, overcast castle weather is. Maybe retire somewhere on the Oregon coast. It's cheaper up there. Cheaper? Just less exorbitantly expensive. Stop kidding yourself. You'll never have that kind of money. But, what if some well-off person liked my weird ramblings enough to pay me to write just for him/her? They could have the publishing rights. What if they then paid me to write while seated on Pilot Rock? Yeah, while up in a ridiculously high chair with a seawater-resistant laptop computer. A boat shuttle. Four-hour sessions. Eight in the morning until noon. Typing in the great gray gloom. Oh yeah! That would be sublime. Piloting a pliable plot to nowhere. [sic]

"Earth to Agent 33. Hello! Anyone home?" I hope he's not thinking of diving off here.

It was Monique's voice. I had become totally immersed in my reverie. "Yeah, still here, 32. Just got lost in my thoughts."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Oh, just my usual meandering nonsense. You'll be able to read it in a week or so. I'll write it up when we get back to Charlotte." *I'm sure he will.*

"Ok, ready to head back to the main trail?"

"Yeah, sure, mahal."

We retreated back to the loop trail. Just before we turned right to continue our counterclockwise trek, the couple that we had seen earlier appeared. *Wow! That was quick. They must be in great physical shape.*

"Are you guys already on lap two?" I asked.

"Oh, no; we took the first spur." *I knew it. My bana assumes the unlikeliest things.*

"Oh, I see," I said with a grin. "I was going to say that you two may want to go out for the Olympics." I guffawed.

The couple laughed.

“No, we’re not in that good of shape,” the woman said.

Off they went. We let them open a nice gap before proceeding, so as to not crowd them. Soon they were out of sight.

We recommenced our hike. The path began to ascend again. And then, we were trudging up another switchback. Once out of the zig-zag, the trail leveled out and the wind died down, as we were now on the south side of the nearly-an-island. We then came to a sharp left turn. A few paces later, and we were staring at a granite cross. *1913. Wow! That cross was put up before World War I.*

“I didn’t know that there was a cross up here,” I admitted.

Monique got her smartphone out and went to Wikipedia.org. “This isn’t the original cross, bana. The first cross went up 242 years ago. See the 1775 engraving? That’s when two Spanish naval explorers landed here.” *Wow! Before the United States officially began.*

“It was probably even more scenic back then, asawa.”

“What do you mean, 33?”

“Oh, the coastal forest was still intact. The redwoods hadn’t been felled left and right. And, no seaside towns or cities.”

“Oh, yes. A pristine natural scene, I’m sure.”

“I wonder what thoughts went through their minds, Monique.”

“I wonder what thoughts went through the Yuroks’ minds, Parkaar.” *Grim thoughts.*

“Probably, ‘oh, shit – they’re already here’, I would venture. A dour attitude most likely suffused the tribe.” *He’s playing for the recorder again. I just know it’s still on.*

We then had a few minutes of silence, seated on a bench near the stone cross. *The Spanish and Christianity arrive on the North Coast. I’m sure that the Yuroks were overjoyed. / I just know that my bana is having negative religious thoughts. He’s always fighting with God. He should just accept the Lord’s blessings and stop questioning everything.*

I stood up, looked around, and started walking back down the path. Monique followed me. We soon came to a faint, very narrow, overgrown footpath on the left. *Nope.*

“This can’t be the right path, bana.” *This little trail looks dangerous. No way am I walking on it.*

“You’re right, asawa. I guess the main path continues up past the cross.”

We then marched up the hillside. Soon we had reached the junction with an old, one-lane, crumbling-asphalt service road. We turned right and began our descent back to the sandy spit, some three hundred feet (91 meters) below.

“It’s all easy walking now, asawa. All downhill on pavement from here. A gentle decline.” *A gentle decline: my current life story. / So glad that the inclines are over.*

“Yey!” Monique exclaimed. “My calves are aching, bana. This has been an intense hikerazzi [*sic*] for me. My legs are not used to it anymore. I can’t even remember the last time I hiked.”

“I hear you, sweetie. You have some Icy Hot[®], right?”

“Yes, I brought the new tube.”

“Good deal. I’ll work it into your legs tonight.”

“You mean between my legs, Agent 33?”

“Naughty-naughty-naughty, Agent 32.”

We both laughed as we made a sharp right turn. The eastern view was just as splendid. Trinidad Harbor and the overall bay could now be seen, as the fog had completely dissipated. Even the low cloud deck was breaking up; sunlight was filtering through. *Darn it! The blasted sun is now out. Was hoping that it would stay gray all day. / I thought that he said that there wouldn’t be any sun here today. Drats! I don’t have my sunscreen.*

“Asawa, we’re losing our castle weather – unfortunately.”

“I hate the sun!” Monique rejoined.

“I know. We both do. It’s strange how some people settle here and then complain about the gray skies and fog. They should move inland or to SoCal.” [Southern California]

“No doubt, Parkaar.”

At a sharp left turn, Monique stopped and pointed at a slanted sea stack. “What rock is that, my geographicator?” [sic]

“That’s Prisoner Rock, 32. Legend has it that an escaped convict hid on it.” *What?!*

“That’s too far to swim without a wetsuit, 33.”

“An accomplice’s skiff probably let him off there, Monique.”

“I sure hope that they left him some food and drink, Parkaarstarveroni.” [sic]

“Maybe he just stayed on it until the heat subsided, 32.” *Let me check.*

“Or, until he sobered up.”

“Surrounded by thirty-three feet [10 meters] of chilly water.”

“Thirty-three feet, 33?” *He’s just plucking his agent number.*

“It’s approximately ten meters. Good for a guestimate.” *Huh?*

“Oh, why did I have to ask? And, please don’t say ‘I don’t know – why?’, silly bana.”

“Deal.” *Deal me an ace. / I wonder if he slipped some of those ‘granules de grandeur’ in his oolong tea back there.*

We ambled down the remainder of the looping path, now back on the northeastern face. Trinidad Wharf was clearly visible below. Fisherman were moving to and fro. And then, I spied Seascape Restaurant.

“Well, that’s where we ate about an hour ago, asawa.”

“Oh, yes. The pier looks fairly new, 33. Notice how the concrete is still white.”

“Good observation, 32.”

We soon arrived at the beginning of the loop. We turned right and descended towards the beach. A stepped footpath appeared on the left. We took it down to the unmetered parking area. There were only eight vehicles in the sandy lot.

I looked back at Trinidad Head. “There’s a short story emerging from that domical rock, Monique.”

“A tall tale, I’m sure, Parkaar.”

“No, I’ll stick to the recording. Just a few minor embellishments.”

“Just a few, huh?”

I nodded. *I’m really going to enjoy writing this day up. / He’s already outlining the story, I can tell.*

We then walked back to the Trinidad RTS bus stop. We had some time to kill, so we moseyed into the Bergeron Winery for a vintage tasting. I ordered us a flight of nine. (They were actually pretty good, especially the Cabernets.)

While sipping a 2010, oak-casked, medium-sediment, gluten-free (smart-ass adjectival insert) Merlot, I overheard a conversation at an adjacent table.

Caucasian brunette (probably 34 to 37 years old): “Oh, by the way, I’m writing again! There’s just something about this area that brings out the literary juices.”

Caucasian strawberry blonde (perhaps 31 to 34 years old): “Ah, that’s so great to hear! You know, I’m so glad that the sun has come out. They were predicting a gloomy afternoon. The spring sun makes me feel so alive.”

I looked at Monique. She had overheard the dialogue, too. We both shook our heads.

“Check, please.”



another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Mad River Madman by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | June 2017

Mad River Madman

by Mike Bozart

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Bill Monziweuk, a balding, 47-year-old, Caucasian, divorced, childless Gulf War veteran who took part in Operation Desert Storm (January – February 1991), had an old 5th-wheel camper on Airstream Avenue near the spare playground in Town & Country Mobile Villa, a neater-than-most mobile home and RV park in the Korplex area of Arcata (CA, USA). He would often watch the children playing while downing his after-dinner Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and think, sometimes aloud. *Hope none of these kids has to experience what I did in Kuwait and Iraq. My God, that has to be the most forlorn slide in America. Is it even safe? What is safe? Where is safe? Hope that little girl doesn't fall off that merry-go-round. World keeps spinning. Keep your hands on the railing, young lady. And, keep your head down. And, keep your fear to yourself. And, keep yourself free from the keep. Doug. Yes, it was Doug who said that 'keep' can mean jail. Where is Doug now? In some small-town Texas keep? Maybe try to track him down later.*

It was a drizzly March (2014) Monday morning. Bill was getting ready to head out the door to his electrical company's work van when his cell phone buzzed in his jacket pocket.

"Hello boss, where do you need me to start today?"

"Bill, I've got some bad news. We're going to have to lay you off, effective immediately. We have lost too many lucrative accounts. We just don't have the money right now. We're laying off Larry, too." *Wonderful. Let go with lazy Larry.*

"Wow! Right in the gut with a quarter twist. Mince no words, Marty. Though, thanks for not sugar-coating it."

"Listen, I'm sorry, Bill. I hate being the bearer of bad news. Your work performance has been exceptional. We may be able to hire you back in a couple of months when our cash flow improves." *And, until then ... exactly what? Just tell the park manager to chill out, and that I'll have the lot rent in two or three months? That should go over really well. Not!*

"What about the van?" *Hope Bill doesn't flip out and take it on a joyride to Crescent City [75 miles (121 km) north] to see that tramp again.*

“You can drop it off today or tomorrow. No rush. Someone will be here to drive you back home.” *No thanks, ex-boss. I’ll just take the bus.*

“Ok, Marty. Will do.” Bill then terminated the call. *Some days it doesn’t pay to wake up. Yeah, some mornings you envy the deceased.*

On April 10th, while returning from a morning walk, Bill saw a white envelope taped to his front door. It was from the park office. The form letter was giving him official notice that if he didn’t have the full rent payment by April 15th, he would be evicted. *Oh, crap! What to do now? Can’t hit up the bank of mom and pop anymore. [They died in 2013 and 2012, respectively.] Should I hit up Steve [his five-years-younger brother in Flagstaff, Arizona] for a loan? Or, maybe Sylvia? [his three-years-older sister in New York City] No. This is my problem to deal with. Just figure something out.*

Bill glanced out the main window. A small Hispanic boy in the playground was trying to carry two red kickballs, but kept dropping them, as his arms just weren’t long enough yet to cradle both. Then the boy left one ball on the ground and ran off gleefully with the other one. *That’s it! I’ll sell the old pickup truck and keep the camper right here. [Kelley] Blue Book value is \$3,400 for a private-party sale. Price it much lower. Maybe \$2,500. Yeah, that’s it; that should move it fast. A quick cash-only sale. Yes! That’s the ticket. Anyway, the grocery store and fast-food restaurants are only a short walk away. Plus, both orange and gold [route] bus stops are right there on Giuntoli. [Lane] Yeah, let’s list that truck online right now.*

Three anxious, nearly sleepless, gray days later, Bill got lucky: His burgundy, high mileage, 2001 Dodge Ram pickup was bought by a middle-aged Caucasian man from Blue Lake (5.6 miles – 9 km – east) for the asking price. After being dropped off by the new owner on Boyd Road, he walked to the park office and paid his outstanding balance. Bill breathed a sigh of relief as he ambled down Oasis Street towards his camper. *Mission accomplished. Wonder when Marty will call? Sure hope he calls by May 1st.*

April turned into May with no word from Marty. Bill then began calling around for work. However, there was no

electrician work to be had, except for a small company in Fortuna (28 miles – 45 km – south). But, he thought it was just too far away, and ruled it out.

And then, with hours of free time on his hands, Bill started drinking. Heavier. And heavier. By June 1st he was up to a 12-pack a day. And by July 1st, he was up another 25%. Yet, his savings were down 75%. Time was running down. But, his stress was running up. Way up.

On Friday evening, July 4th, a nine-year-old boy lit off a firecracker in the playground. It triggered a PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) episode, Bill's first since 1997. Bill immediately had a vision of a charred, still smoldering, blown-off left arm – his army buddy's – on the kitchen floor. He ran outside, somewhat drunk, and began yelling: "Get down! Incoming! Everyone, get down now! And, stay down."

The kids stopped and looked at him, all mouths agape. Time froze. A passing vireo almost forgot to flap her wings.

Then, about ten seconds later, he realized that he had suffered another PTSD event. He turned around, lowered his head, and slowly stumbled back inside his camper. *It's over. I'm cracking up. I'm almost broke. What to do now? Ah, yes, I know. It's mini-storage time.*

The next Monday he walked to the park office. He told the sandy-blonde-haired, 40-ish, slightly overweight Caucasian lady the truth: He was just about out of money. Bill also told her that he was willing to sell his camper for only \$3,500, just 70% of its current value. She agreed to give him one month to sell it.

Bill put a *For Sale* sign on his camper and advertised it on a local buy-sell-trade website. In the last week of July, a prospective buyer showed up and offered him \$3,200. Bill accepted the bid, provided that the 50-something, thin-mustached Honduran drive him and his belongings to Mad River Storage Center in Glendale (3.7 miles – 6 km – east). The man then replied: "Deal, señor." [mister in Spanish] And, off they went in the man's shiny, blue, 2012 Ford F-250 pickup, camper in tow. *So much for this place. It's been mostly nice.*

At the mini-storage facility in Glendale, the smiling, denim-clad Latino helped Bill unload the contents of his former camper into a 6' x 8' (1.83 x 2.44 meters) exterior-access storage space at the back of the property in the shadow of a tall evergreen. *Perfect. Joe [an old friend of Bill] gave me the 24-hour gate code. Murphy's [a grocery store] is just across the street. That will also be my bathroom. Sponge baths here we come. Great! There's an electrical outlet for the fridge and microwave. A space heater should be enough for the winter. Living on the margins now – on the edge of homelessness. I should probably start a journal. Maybe turn it into a novel someday.*

Bill thanked the Hispanic man. Then he watched his camper being pulled away. *There she goes. Bye-bye, humble abode. / [English translation] Is that man going to live in that mini-storage unit? I think he is.*

From August to November, Bill's 400-foot-radius (244-meter-wide) world was just three places: his mini-storage loft, Murphy's, and the adjacent bowling alley (E & O Lanes), or more specifically, the D & L Lounge.

It was at this no-frills D & L Lounge at 5:05 PM on the Friday after Thanksgiving that Bill started talking to a svelte, red-dressed, mid-40-something brunette. She had seen better times, too.

"So, what's your story?" he brazenly asked her as she took a seat at the bar, two stools to his right. *She's quite attractive. Almost too attractive for this place. / Woah! When was the last time this guy shaved?*

She raised her penciled eyebrows. "Oh, nothing that unusual. Got married. Had two healthy kids. They grew up and left home. Husband failed to grow up. So, I left home, too. Got divorced. Took a financial beating. And, now I'm here. Now, what's your story? Oh, by the way, my name is Charlene." *Charlene, Charlene. Where is that Charlene from my army unit now?*

"Nice to meet you, Charlene. My name is Bill. I'm a Desert Storm vet. Now an out-of-work electrician. Divorced, too. But, never had any kids. My living arrangement at the moment is quite unique."

“You still live with your ex, don’t you?” *Huh?!*

“Oh, God, no! Nothing like that.”

“Hmmm ... Let me guess. Hold on. It’s coming to me. You’re renting a garage apartment in Arcata.” *Probably from a successful sibling.*

“Ha! I wish.”

“You’re renting a backyard shed near the airport [ACV] in McKinleyville.”

“Warmer.” *I wonder if he can still get it up.*

“You’re living in an unfinished basement.” *That sure would be nice.*

“Cooler.”

“Bill, I think you have me stumped.” *Man, I’d love to stump-hump her.*

“Drumroll, please. Dah-dah-dah-dum. Ok, prepare for shock, Charlene. I’m living in a mini-storage unit across the street. I plan on turning the experience into a novel someday.” *Whew! The wacky ones always seem to find me.*

“Oh, my ... Well, I’m sorry to hear that, Bill.”

“It’s really not that bad. It’s quiet. Never any loud neighbors. The space heater is more than adequate on chilly nights.”

“But, it’s cramped, right?”

“Space is at a premium.” *I’m sure.*

“Excuse my bluntness, but where do you use the bathroom, brush your teeth, and take a shower?”

“Over at Murphy’s.” *No wonder he looks – and smells – the way he does. Need to get him cleaned up. Seems like a decent guy just down on his luck. Maybe he doesn’t have a family. Plus, he’s a vet. I owe it to him.*

“Hey Bill, the small house that I’m renting has a large, insulated shed with electricity and indoor plumbing. Could you afford \$200 a month, all utilities included?” *Sure could use some help on my rent. He looks trustworthy. I don’t think he would rape me, or harm me in any way. Might even add some safety. That house is way out by itself. I’m an easy target out there all alone.*

“Sure. When can I move in?” Bill grinned. *He almost looked like Jack Nicholson from ‘The Shining’ when he said that. Should I really do this? / I bet she’s wild in the sack.*

“Well, I live out in the country. Do you have a car?”

“I had a pickup truck, but not anymore. Sold it. Are you near a bus stop?”

“No, I’m not anywhere near a bus stop. However, I have a motor scooter than you are welcome to use.”

Two days later, an overcast Sunday (November 30th) afternoon with drizzle, Bill was loading his stuff into Charlene’s silver minivan. They then drove three miles (about 5 km) up Fieldbrook Road to a small one-bedroom cottage off in the woods.

Charlene backed down to the outbuilding, about twenty meters (65.6 feet) behind her redwood-sided, one-level residence. She then helped Bill load his stuff into the finished shed, which was almost as big as her cabin. Eighteen wet minutes later, Bill prepaid the rent with ten \$20 bills. *Nice to get the money up front. He’s a good guy.*

Charlene then walked back to her 2007 Chrysler Town & Country minivan. Dusk was already mixing with the silent, almost-hovering mist. She stopped and looked back at Bill. “You should have hot water in about thirty minutes. Have a restful night, Bill. Please call me if you need anything, or if something isn’t working. Oh, the motor scooter has some gas in it. Feel free to use it. I think tomorrow will be less rainy.” *She trusts me. / I hope that I haven’t made a terrible decision.*

Bill and Charlene would have a wild sexual romp after a wine-saturated dinner the next night in the cozy cottage. It had been a long time without for both of them. They, however, would still maintain their separate domiciles. It made the sexual forays more exciting.

But then on Thursday, the 18th of December, Bill disappeared. Charlene wondered what had happened to him, as his belongings and cell phone were still in the shed. She considered calling the police, but for some reason never went through with it. She just assumed that he was wandering around somewhere, perhaps on a long hike.

Two days later, a dank Saturday, she saw his picture on a local news website while sipping herbal tea. He looked crazy, frightened and bewildered. Apparently a McKinleyville policeman had arrested Bill on Friday for cutting out sections of fence along the Mad River. The article stated that seven dogs, five goats and three horses were now missing.

Bill, who was apprehended in the frigid Mad River while standing with a staff in his right hand and a German Shepherd at his left side (on a point bar), died of hypothermia later that day. The dog survived.

Note: The idea for this story arrived when Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) saw a disheveled man and dog burst out from a wooded tract along the Mad River.

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



AL on ARCATA by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | June 2017

Al on Arcata

by Mike Bozart

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On a showery-from-remnants-of-Tropical-Storm-Cindy June (2017) morning in near-uptown Charlotte (NC, USA), I texted my late-40-something, dark-haired with some salty patches, suave, always-quick-with-a-quip Caucasian pal, Al Niño (Agent A~O). I wasn't sure of where he was on the globe at the moment.

Are you awake?

Fifty-nine minutes later, at 11:10 AM EDT, he replied.

Hey buddy! I'm awake now.

I tried to reply to his text with a call, but for some odd reason it just would not go through. Thus, I decided to send him a terse imperative-mood text.

Call me.

He rang me three minutes later. His slightly modified name came up on my phone's tiny screen.

"Hello, is this the amazing one?"

"Al Niño here – live – not a recording."

"Well, how lucky can we be?"

"You tell me, Mike van Tryke." [my art-name]

"Well, Al, maybe not so lucky. We're off by a minute."

"What do you mean, Michael?" *Oh boy, he's already on with that darn Michael shtick. He knows how it grates on me, and he relishes it.*

"Al, I texted you at 10:11, and you replied at 11:10."

"Yeah, so what? I was asleep. I was up late last night, thinking about my next life-changing invention, which I certainly won't share with you at this juncture, when I realized that of the seven days of the week, only Tuesday has seven letters." *Wow! I thought the same thing three nights ago, but I won't tell him. He would never believe me.*

"Woah! You're getting as bad as me, Al. Anyway, the texting times could have been 10:10 and 11:11 if I were quicker and you were slower by sixty seconds." *What in the world is he talking about now? / Zeros and ones: binary, too.*

“Yeah, well, there are pills for that, Michael. Please tell me that you are not still sweeping leaves off the back deck, raking them up, bagging them, then dumping them back on the deck, and – ” *Oh, brother.*

“No, no. That High Peak [near Etowah, NC, USA] daze is over and done. So, where are you?”

“Back home.” [a posh penthouse condo in lower Manhattan, New York City]

“So, how was Italy?”

“Nice. We had a fantastic fortnight in old Italia. [sic] We stayed mostly in the north, in the Lombardy region.”

“Ah, Al Milano.” [sic]

Al chuckled. “We did a day in Rome, and trust me, that was enough.” *Probably suffered a gaffe.*

“You weren’t a roamin’ Roman?” *How cheeseball.*

“No, just a-roamin’ with ramen. Cup in hand, mon.” [sic] *Al’s already in not-so-rare form.*

“Did you get canaled in Venice?” *Tryke’s so corny.*

“No, we passed on Venice this go-round. Too many tourists this time of year.”

“How was the weather?”

“Splendid. It was your classic Mediterranean dry-season weather. Sunny, but not too hot. Low humidity. Nothing like Charlotte or New York City in June. How was the weather in coastal Humboldt?” [County, CA, USA]

“Great! Pleasantly cool and overcast for the most part. Misty mornings, but no rain. Castle weather, as we call it. Oh, speaking of Humboldt, I was wondering if I could ask you some questions about your time in Arcata.” *He’s recording for another short story. I’m sure his graphic depiction of me will be quite bizarre.*

“Sure, fire away, 33. [my psecret psociety agent no.] You’ve got ten minutes. I have a conference call at noon and must organize some notes beforehand.” *Organize some notes? On what? Maybe he’s already baked.*

“Ok, excellent. I have ten questions, A-tilde-Oh.”

“One minute per question. Hope you don’t have any three-parters.” *Free fartars.*

“No, they’re all single-sentence-answer questions, Al.” *Good.*

“Go! The clock has started, Michael.” *Ughhh.*

“Question one: Why did you pick HSU [Humboldt State University] for your junior and senior years of college?” [Al took his first two years at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte.]

“My best friend’s – well, at the time – brother was going there. He said that it was pretty cool. And, it being in the weed [marijuana] capital of the United States was a big plus.” *I’m sure it was.*

“Ok, question two: When did you start at HSU in Arcata?”

“Oh, it must have been August of 1999 or 2000.” *He forgot the year? Yeah, he’s stoned.*

“Ok, moving right along. Question three: Where did you live?”

“I lived on campus the first semester. However, being an older student, I didn’t really like it. Thus, I moved to an off-campus apartment at Sunset [Avenue] & Western. [Avenue] It was only a seven-minute pedal-pumper on the bike.” *Pedal-pumper? Perhaps Al knows that I’m recording.*

“Very good. Question four: How long did you live out there?”

“Let’s see ... I graduated in December of 2002. So, two and a half years, I guess.” *He guesses? Yeah, he sparked up a bowl for breakfast.*

“Ok, question five: Where did you hang out mostly?”

“I mostly hung out around Arcata Plaza.”

“Oh, we stayed next to it.”

“Really? Where?”

“Hotel Arcata.”

“Oh, yes. Good pick. Very convenient.”

“It was. We walked to Humboldt Brewing one evening. It was a cool scene.”

“Ah, yes, Humbrews. Been there many times.”

“Ok, question six: Did you ever go to Trinidad?” [15 miles (24 km) north of Arcata]

“Dude, I went all the way up the coastal highway to Vancouver, Canada. Trinidad Bay is very scenic. Sea stacks aplenty.”

“Did you hike Trinidad Head?”

“Many times.”

“I wrote a short story about our hike on Trinidad Head, Al.”

“Oh, what’s the title, Michael?”

“The title is – are you ready for this? – *Trinidad Head*. It’s about 3,500 words. The tale lopes and loops.” *Lopes and loops? Tryke’s been sniffing glue in the office again.*

“You’re wasting time, 33.”

“Question seven: Did you ever go to Old Town in Eureka?” [8 miles (13 km) south]

“I endured it a few times. Too many spangers.” [sic]

“Spangers?”

“Bums asking for spare change. Not sure who coined that portmanteau.” *Portmanteau?*

“We stayed in a two-star motel [Town House] on the edge of Old Town for two nights. Monique [Agent 32, my wife] was thoroughly freaked-out by all of the tweakers [methamphetamine addicts] on the sidewalks.”

“The new mayor of Eureka is a tweaker.” *Wow!*

“Really, Al?”

“Yeah, there are now so many of them that they were able to vote one of their own into office.”

“Unbelievable!” *It’s just too easy to fool him.*

“Not! Jesus Christ, Tryke! You are still as gullible as ever.” *He’s right.*

“Question eight: How are the winters in Arcata?”

“One hundred and twenty-one – if it’s not a Leap Year – consecutive, sunless, chilly-ass, agonizing, rainy days: December, January, February, March.” *Nice quick math. Maybe Al’s not totally toasted.*

“Exaggerating a bit, aren’t you?”

“Maybe a hair. But, it’s almost as bad as Seattle. Mold would grow on the walls if I didn’t run the dehumidifier. It was the only place that I ever got jock itch.” *Lovely.*

“I think I could deal with it, Al. I’m not a sun person like you. I’ll take a damp, gray winter in exchange for mild year-round temperatures.”

“It’s only mild if you’re within four miles [6.4 km] of the coast. Even Blue Lake, which is just six miles [9.7 km] as a crow flies from the ocean, is much colder in the winter and warmer – and much sunnier – in the summer. The marine-layered coastline is dank all year.”

“But remember, Al, we like that castle weather.”

“I like some, too. But, trust me, Tryke; the winters in Arcata will try your mind. People go batty. Everything has to be inside. It gets claustrophobic. Therefore, lots of over-medication. New addicts every May. There’s a saying that I will never forget: ‘Arcata winters are so drab that atheists begin to pray.’ Yeah, it’s that bad, bud. Believe me.” *I bet that he just made that up.*

“Ok, question nine; it’s a bit personal: Any girlfriends while at HSU? You can hit the Skip button if you like.”

“I only got laid twice in twenty-nine months.”

“No way! Not a hip hepcat like you. Don’t underreport now.”

“It’s the cold, hard-on truth. Most of the women out there weren’t my type. The stripper in Eureka was almost a relief. At least she shaved her legs and underarms ... and, yes, her pubes.” *What candor!*

“Ok, Al, we’ve somehow made it to question ten, which is: Would you ever move back?”

“I go back to visit every year. But, only in mid-summer. The place pulls at your heart and mind when you leave.”

“Yeah, I hear ya, Al. I already want to go back.”

“But, as for living out there year-round again ... No, can't say that I would. I certainly would love to buy a small pad out there. It's a cool summer place. I just can't four-season it.”

“I think that Monique and I could do the winters just fine.”

“A lot of easterners say that before they actually live inside a cold, waterlogged sponge. And, hiking in 39-degree [Fahrenheit; 4° Celsius] rain is not much fun.”

“I guess that my tolerance for cool, wet weather is higher than yours, Al. I'll take those kind of days over 97-degree, [Fahrenheit; 36° Celsius] sun-scorching sauna-steamers.”

“Whatever, Tryke. Those limited-to-the-interior winters drive people incrementally insane.” *What a ridiculous remark. Oh, just let it go.*

“Ok, that's it, Al. Thanks for your time, jetsetter.”

“I have one question for you, Michael.”

“Sure. Shoot.”

“What did you think of Arcata Bay?”

“Underwhelming to be honest. I like rocky shorelines. So, how's that screenplay going?”

<click>

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Fortunate in Fortuna by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | July 2017

Fortunate in Fortuna

by Mike Bozart

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Fortuna. Spanish for fortune. A place with a name like that surely invites a psecret psociety visit when in the vicinity. And we, Monique (Agent 32, my wife) and I (Agent 33), very much were on Saturday, June 3rd (2017).

The two of us hopped aboard a half-full RTS (Redwood Transit System) bus at 4th & H Streets in Eureka (CA, USA) at a refreshingly cool – and agreeably overcast – 3:11 PM. The 36-minute, 18-mile (29 km) ride was relaxingly noneventful; this time there were no deranged conga-drum-toting passengers.

At 3:47 we disembarked onto N Street (near 11th Street) in the log-sign-proclaimed ‘friendly city’, a small town of 12,321 (or so) inhabitants. We paused to survey the scene from the sidewalk. *So, this is Fortuna. Seems nice enough. A bit warmer down here. / This town is sunnier than Eureka. I don't like it. I forgot my parasol. I don't want my pinay [Philippine] skin to get any darker.*

“Hungry, asawa?” [wife in Cebuano and Tagalog] I asked my brown-eyed, black-haired, late-30-something spouse.

“I could go for a little something, 33.”

“How about that Mexican place that the lady told us about in Eureka?”

“Sure, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] Lead the way.”

After only a two-block walk, we had arrived at Taco Loco (on the corner of Main & 10th Streets). The veggie tacos did the trick: not too large, fairly tasty, reasonably priced.

“Where’s an interesting place to check out in Fortuna?” I asked the mid-20-something, dark-brown-haired Latino waiter. *Check out? Does he want to die today?*

“Tourists?” he asked. *My red hair. / Because I'm Asian.*

“Yeah, bus-to-foot tourists from Eureka,” Monique informed.

“Why did you guys journey down to Fortuna?” our genuinely curious waiter asked.

“It’s an intriguing Spanish name and it’s on an RTS bus route.” *And Ernie [the electronic earwig] would approve.*

“You mean that you didn’t come here for the Eel River?” he asked, surprised that I didn’t mention the shallow-this-time-of-year, yet still wide, northwest-flowing stream.

“Well, I’m not much of an eel fisherman anymore,” I replied. *Probably out-of-staters. [sic]*

“Oh, the name is a bit of a misnomer,” he then stated. “What the early white settlers thought were eels were actually lampreys. You know, those gnarly-mouthed whale suckers.” *Whale suckers? Yuck! / Gnarly? People still say ‘gnarly’? And way up here, a long way from the San Fernando Valley.*

“I see,” I acknowledged. “Wrong names often stick.”

Our Hispanic American waiter wasn’t phased in the least by my remark. “You can still land steelhead and even nice-size salmon. It’s not completely fished-out like many think. As for an interesting nearby place to visit, there’s the [Fortuna] Depot Museum. Lots of artifacts and history in there. Just walk down Main Street and make a left on Park Street. You’ll be there in ten minutes max.” *That sounds perfect. / That’s not so far. Don’t want to get too far from the bus stop. Hope hubby knows the time of the last bus back to Eureka. Don’t want to get stranded here for the night. It might be scary.*

We thanked him for that bit of info and left him a generous tip with a *Gold* card (a cardstock coupon for a free download of my erotic, deceptive, maddening 2013 roman noir).

In nine minutes and nine seconds, we were on the front porch of the waiter-recommended, lapboard-sided, old railroad depot museum. An ancient caboose was moored to the right. The corner entrance door was to the left. It wasn’t locked. We casually entered.

A 70-ish Caucasian couple were the only two inside. The older woman cheerfully greeted us. Then the older man stepped away from his desk and walked up beside his apparent wife.

“Want the just-for-you guided tour?” he asked us.

“Sure, if it doesn’t cost an arm and a leg,” I replied.

“We’re frugal travelers,” Monique revealed.

“No body parts need to be donated; it’s totally free,” the white-haired man announced with a smile.

“You’ll enjoy it,” the elderly woman said. “He’s a walking local-history encyclopedia.” *We’ve come to the right place.*

“Where are you two from?” he then asked us.

“Charlotte,” Monique answered.

“Ah, North Carolina,” he said. “I won’t hold it against you this time.” He then chuckled. *Huh?*

“Where are you from?” I asked, unable to specifically decipher his faint Midwestern non-accent.

“Indiana,” he stated. *Ah, yes; he sounds just like Wally.*

“Indianapolis?” I then asked, venturing a guess.

“Bloomington,” he specified. *That explains his remark.*

“Ah, Indiana University – bigtime college basketball rivals of [the University of] North Carolina and Duke,” [University] I posited.

“Well, to be honest, [the University of] Kentucky is our biggest rival,” he clarified.

“When did you move out here?” I asked.

“A long, long time ago. Way back in the ‘70s.”

“It seems like a nice town,” Monique opined.

“It is. Fortuna wasn’t our first stop, but we just kind of settled here. I’d say that we’re pretty fortunate to be in Fortuna, all things considered. There certainly are worse places to wind up.” *Indeed.*

“No doubt,” I added.

The old man then opened a vintage wooden door that had an antique doorknob. In the spacious yet packed room, we saw a plethora of manual tree-cutting saws on the main wall. Some of the slightly curved, large-tooth, steel blades were over two meters (6.56 feet) in length.

He noticed my interest. “You certainly didn’t want to have a drunk as your sawing partner. If he didn’t show up for work, you wouldn’t get paid, either. A single man was worthless with one of these tandem saws.”

“I know a few friends that I’d have to rule out,” I said with a quick laugh.

Monique was looking at some old rods, reels and miscellaneous fishing tackle. “Was the fishing better back then?” she asked.

“Much, much better,” he replied. “They say that you could walk across the Eel River on the backs of the salmon and never get wet.” *And never touch an eel.*

“Oh, wow!” Monique exclaimed. “I love fresh salmon, grilled.”

“They reeled them in by the ton,” he said. “And then, they sent their haul down to fancy restaurants in San Francisco. [255 miles (410 km) south] The railroad sections were all linked together in 1903. Booming times in Slide – Fortuna’s original town name – taken from the name of a nearby hill.”

“Did this area get caught up in the mid-19th-century gold rush?” I asked. *Mid-19th-century? This guy must be a writer.*

“Oh, yes. Lots of that sought-after, soft, yellow metal was found in the mountain creeks around here. Fortuna became a service town for the miners. Well, for a while.”

“Very interesting,” I said.

“So, what line of work are you in?” the old man asked us.

“Writing: technical for pay; creative for folly,” I answered. *I just knew this guy was a writer. Wonder if he’ll ever use any bits of our conversation.*

“We’re part of a group known as psecret psociety,” Monique told him. “However, it’s really not very secret, and it’s not much of a society. Oh, it’s spelled with silent p’s.” *Pompous puntificators, [sic] I bet.*

“You mean like p-s-e-c –,” he spelled.

“Exactly,” I said.

“Is there a secret handshake?” he then asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. *Huh?*

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking stunned.

“I’m not sure if I got that memo,” I said. “But, maybe there was no memo.” *This boy has gone off the rails.*

“Are they changing the locks while you’re away?” he then asked both of us with a taut grin. *A pair of loons.*

“Maybe so,” Monique said. “But, one never knows.” *She’s gone off the rails, too. What a demented duo.*

“Your eccentric coterie sounds like quite a surreal undertaking,” he serenely said.

“Surrealism is certainly a major ingredient,” I stated.

“Well, some have reported seeing a strange, translucent, claw-handed, flat-headed, elf-eared apparition on the museum’s front porch, right before dusk,” he disclosed. “I tend to think that it’s just the redwoods’ branch and needle shadows.” *Darn! We can’t stay that long. / I hope my hubby just lets this bait go. We don’t have time for this. We can’t miss that northbound bus.*

“That sounds like something that would be right up our alley,” I told him. “However, the clock is not our friend today.” *If not now ...*

We then said our genial farewells.

As Monique and I walked over Rohner Creek on the footbridge to O Street, my mind passerelled [sic] over to knowhere. [sic] *Wow and how! Those sprinkled-upon-the-taco granules of grandeur have finally kicked in. This bizarre universe is still expanding. And accelerating. The galaxies are whizzing away from our Milky Way. Faster and faster. Someday the nighttime sky will be pitch-black – completely starless, even on the clearest of nights. Maybe in five hundred billion years. But, who – or what – will experience this in Fortuna? Any sentient entity? Wake up! Fortuna and Earth will be long gone. Daniel Gabriel Fahrenheit’s [inventor of the eponymous temperature scale] parents died on the same day [August 14th] in 1701 from ingestion of toxic mushrooms. Wonder what species they ate. Probably an Amanita variety. Death caps. Destroying angels. Such a nasty exit mode. Around 151,600 people die each day. Wonder if there are any magic mushrooms in these woods. Are we in liberty cap territory? A day in Fortuna in 1917. A worker yawns. Bleak sorrow. Sure would like to get a cursory look-see at the front of that museum.*

“Agent 32, how about a quick glance?”

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Lolita of Loleta by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | July 2017

Lolita of Loleta
by Mike Bozart
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A foster-care group home in Loleta, a small North Coast community situated 15 miles (24 km) south of Eureka (CA, USA), is where one 14½-year-old, über-precocious, fatalistic, raven-haired, brown-skinned, thin but no longer flat, already-dressing-rather-womanly Laura Swauger ended up in late July of 2015, a month after her Wiyot-Mexican mother died of an opiate overdose, and four years after her Caucasian father had run off with a casino tart in Reno (NV), never to be seen or heard from again.

Laura, surprisingly, was not an in-trouble student. She was excelling in her coursework despite her young life's tragic circumstances. In fact, she had made the A Honor Roll her freshman year at Table Bluff Academy, a special at-risk high school in a repurposed warehouse near the confluence of the Eel River and the North Bay estuary. And, even though just a rising sophomore, she would be allowed to take general psychology, a course that was usually restricted to juniors and seniors. She was more than thrilled; she was elated. Laura screamed "Yey!" over and over when no one was around on that mid-June weekday in 2016.

Online research was Laura's sole consuming love. It was a tunnel-like passion that occupied, focused and protected her budding mind; it kept troubling thoughts about her parents at bay, as well as emerging postpubescent desires for older boys. She was amazed at what shocking information she could dig up with just a few strategic mouse clicks. Yes, her desired occupation was already quite clear: back-office private investigator. She could hardly wait to start.

Laura was also extremely fascinated by people's motives for executing risqué and/or illicit out-of-character schemes. The human mind to her was an endless enigma, replete with illogical inclinations and irrational thoughts; it was fascinating, frightening and always mysterious. She yearned to learn more about it, partly for personal reasons.

Way over on the eastern side of North America was one Marc Matthieuwsohn, a dark-haired, goateed, average-height, lean, 24-year-old Caucasian, who had graduated from UNCA (University of North Carolina at Asheville) in May of 2014 with a bachelor's degree in adolescent psychology with a minor in education. After teaching for two years at Brevard High School (36 miles – 58 km – southwest of UNCA), Marc decided to seek employment elsewhere, as he

and his blonde-haired, blue-eyed, popular to so many in the area, almost-fiancée girlfriend, Kim, had abruptly split up due to irreconcilable differences: Kim still wanted to party eight nights a week – she couldn't let go of the bottle, nor the pipe; Marc had tired of the intoxicated dramas and wanted to settle down, get married, buy a house, and maybe have a kid. Well, this is the narrative that he told family, friends and acquaintances after that chapter-closing evening.

Marc's humble life plan for Kim and him together went up in a whiff of green smoke when he came home unexpectedly to their Pisgah Forest (5 miles – 8 km – northeast of Brevard) apartment for lunch on Friday, June 9th (2016). Kim and her red Honda Civic sedan were gone. There was no note. And, Kim wouldn't respond to his calls or text messages. He thought, occasionally aloud: *Where the hell is she? Should I call the police? Has she been abducted? No, I don't think so. I smell a rat. A deceitful weaselly rat. Hmmm ... No, let's just wait a few hours. Need to call the school and tell them that something urgent came up. Yeah, that's it. Let's see if my 'dear' lady shows up before my usual arrival time. Yeah, let's just wait and see. Need to park my car around the corner of the building to get it out of her sight. Surprise, honey! It's me.*

Kim returned at 4:14 PM – twelve minutes before Marc's typical schoolday arrival time – oblivious to his presence in their apartment. When confronted in the bedroom, Kim said that she was just communing with nature in the woods near a waterfall with some female friends in a steep gorge that blocked all cell phone reception.

Marc didn't buy it. He then asked to see her new iPhone. It was off. A missing condom from his sock drawer confirmed his suspicions at 9:29 PM. They were over and done by the 10 o'clock news. Kim would move out the next day, presumably with her new lover.

Six lonely days later, Marc saw the Table Bluff Academy ad posted on a teachers-wanted website. He literally jumped at it. The knocked-over cup of spearmint tea went all over the old Dell laptop's keyboard. Moreover, he was on a flight to ACV (Eureka-Arcata airport) the next Monday for an interview. He would get the job. And, an apartment.

The 2016-17 Table Bluff school year began on Wednesday, August 24th. Fifteen-year-old Laura was one of thirteen students in Marc's fifth-period general psychology class. She

sat quietly alone in the back of the classroom, taking copious notes and doodling. Laura maintained an A+ average through the Christmas break. The material wasn't that difficult for her. She thought Marc was an effective and somewhat handsome teacher who presented well, but she didn't have any amorous feelings for him. Well, not until the second semester, after she turned 16.

January of 2017 felt so different than last year to Laura. Whereas before she could suppress and rationalize away her feelings for the opposite sex, now she couldn't. And, it was all because of Marc. He now looked like a Hollywood actor to her. But, not a shallow photogenic-only actor – a very-wise-with-distinguished-looks thespian. Yes, Marc had become her sage Adonis. Laura's mind was already racing into the future. *Gosh, he's so sexy and smart. I love him already. I want to have sex with him! Soon! I want Marc to be the first. And, only. We'll get married. We'll have a family. Yes! It's going to be great. My life will have meaning. Finally.*

Laura moved up to the front of the classroom. She sat with her legs spread consciously wider than proper for a skirt. Her pellucid tan-colored blouse's third-from-the-top button was now conspicuously undone showing her 32-C bra. Laura's left hand was now incessantly twirling her silky jet-black locks. *Notice me! Please notice me, Marc. I'm right here.*

Marc noticed. He had dealt with such hormones-a-raging female student behavior a few times in Brevard. Marc then employed his tried and true defense: When now addressing Laura, he only looked – always solemnly – at her forehead, so as to avoid her wanton eyes. But, his stratagem would be severely tested this time. Laura was smitten. *I will win him over.*

Then, on Friday, February 10th, Laura significantly stepped up her attack on Marc's vulnerable psyche. As Marc was walking towards her, just before the end of the period, she pushed a small red envelope off her desktop onto the floor directly in front of him. Marc bent down to pick it up. That's when from the corner of his left eye, he noticed Laura's panty-less vulva. *Oh, my! Give me strength. / I know that he just saw my pussy. I know that he wants it. Bad.*

"Uh, this fell off your desk," Marc meekly announced as he handed the obviously-a-card-inside envelope to Laura. But, this time his eyes met hers. It was lust both ways. *I got him.*

He wants me. / This girl is playing me like a forty-dollar fiddle.

“Oh, it’s for you, teacher,” she said with a flirtatious smile. *Just for you.*

Marc kept it and walked back to the lectern. The bell sounded to his supreme relief. The eleven present-day students departed the high-ceilinged, taupe-painted, retrofitted, 2nd-floor classroom. Laura was last. She turned and blew Marc a kiss from the hallway. He stared at her with a blank expression. *Danger! She’s trouble. Serious trouble, because she’s not only sexy, but smart, too. Smart as a whip. What to do now? Remember, she’s a minor. Don’t want to end up in a Northern California prison. / I must have this man. Only this man. It will be Marc and me forever. It has to be. My life has had so much tragedy. This must be where I get a nice dose of good fortune. I deserve it. The cosmos owes me. Bigtime! It’s amazing that I haven’t committed suicide. Happy days here we come!*

Back at his one-bedroom apartment in downtown Eureka, Marc ate a frozen vegetable casserole for dinner. He had saved room for dessert: Laura’s card, which he now plucked from his inner jacket pocket and gazed at on his round, maple, almost-antique dining table. *Oh dear, I can only imagine what this card is going to say. Well, let’s get it over with.*

Marc opened the 3” x 5” (7.62 cm x 12.70 cm) envelope. A Valentine’s Day card was inside. It had two, conjoined, cartoonish hearts on the front. The script text proclaimed:

Sometimes you get lucky ... and find the love of your dreams. Call us lucky. Happy Valentine’s Day!

Marc inhaled and opened the card. Laura’s penmanship was meticulous. He read the message on the left side.

I’m so very glad – way beyond words, actually – that you took the teaching job at Table Bluff, my beau. You came 2,788 miles [4,487 km] from a small Blue Ridge town in North Carolina to meet me here in this tiny remote township in northwestern coastal California. It surely must be our destiny. Or, we can just call it fate. The word doesn’t really matter, honey. What matters is that

we will be a team of two from now on. I'm so glad that I waited for you, Marc. You will be my first and only. I promise. We will get married. I will give you children, sweetie. As many, or as few, as you wish. Wonderful, beautiful, smart children. We will cherish them together. Our love will be undying for each other. Let's just go ahead and consummate our relationship this weekend, since Valentine's Day is on Tuesday. I'm at the peak of my menstrual cycle, so I'm very horny and ready for it, loverboy. I want you to give it to me hard. Oh, and don't worry about any blood from my hymen rupturing. I already took care of that. Craving your touch already. Expecting your call or text. XoxoX, Laura 707-733-XXXX

Marc sighed and took a deep breath. *She just had to be in my class. How did she know where I was living?*

Then there was a loud thud. Someone had dropped something heavy in the apartment above. It momentarily freed Marc's troubling train of thought. He then read the pre-printed words on the right side of the card's interior.

I'm so happy to have you – you and only you – as my forever Valentine! Love always, sweetheart!

Underneath this text were Laura's lip prints in bright pink lipstick. He sniffed them; they had a rose-like fragrance. *She really has it bad for me. But, why? Crazy teenage-girl hormones. Must be smart about this. One wrong step could get my ass fired. Or, worse. Probably best to just ignore her. Sure is tempting, though. No, don't even think about it.*

Marc then turned the card over. A stark-naked image was immediately – and indelibly – etched onto his brain: a full-frontal nude photo of a young lady. The mirror flash conveniently obscured the eyes and most of the nose, but it was unmistakably Laura. Marc exhaled slowly and slid the card back into its tight-fitting envelope. *Whew! What am I going to do? Guess I should just do nothing. Certainly must not contact her. It's too bad that she's not 18. [the age of consent in California] This girl has got my pickle in a pickle. And, she certainly knows it. Maybe she will just lose interest in me. Red-hot crushes usually flame out fairly fast. Just tread carefully. Ignore, ignore, ignore. Repeat. Ignore ...*

It was now almost midnight in the group home on Cannibal Island Road. Laura's roommate, a 15-year-old Asian American girl of Laotian ancestry, was already asleep. Laura was restlessly pensive. *Why hasn't he called or texted me? He's afraid; it's so obvious. Does Marc think that I'm just setting him up for epic downfall? Does he think that I'm just the bait in some sting operation? Need to set his mind straight with an e-mail. His e-mail address is on the school's online directory. Yeah, let's ease my mentor's mind. No, no, no. Don't use that one. All of those e-mail accounts are monitored by the school. Need to get his personal e-mail address. I'm sure that he has a Gmail or Yahoo account. Time to get sleuthing.*

Laura picked up her android smartphone and got to work. In just three minutes she had found Marc's Gmail address. She clicked on the hyperlink. And then, she began to type away.

Hello my wonderful husband-to-be – my dearest Marc,

I'm very concerned about you. I can't sleep, because I haven't heard from you yet. Please put your mind at rest. I'm not part of some entrapment setup to snare sexual predators of minors. Rest assured that you are not going to be featured on *Dateline NBC*. Did you really think so? I hope not.

Marc, I am now very much a woman, as evidenced by the pic that I attached to the back of that Valentine's Day card. I'm not a little girl anymore, and I'm way more mature than females my age. Well, you saw it, right? If you haven't done so already, look at the photograph, Marc. It's really me. Did you get aroused? Tell me the truth. Don't lie to me.

Anyway, I had my first period four years ago. The so-called 'legal' age of consent may be 18 in priggish California, but it's 16 in neighboring Nevada (Shall we move there? Anywhere but Reno is fine.), only 15 in France (Bon voyage à Paris, mon chéri?), 14 in most of South America, and 13 where my mother's family came from in Mexico. In some countries, it is only 12. The point is, it's just an arbitrary number, Marc. You know that I'm not a girl anymore. I'm an intelligent young woman who is smart enough to choose you over the dumb jocks and loser pill-poppers. I told them all to go fly a kite – not interested.

Trust me, I'm nothing like your faithless ex-girlfriend Kim – Miss Infidelity!

Marc, you know that I could test out of high school tomorrow. I'm not just getting an A in your class. Not to brag, but I'm not the usual, dimwitted, troubled-past chick. So, please don't say that I'm too young to know what I'm doing, saying or typing. And, don't claim that the age gap is too great. My father was 10 years older than my mom. Our gap is less than 9 years.

Now, my darling, won't you please cease with your reticence and contact me? I can't go on without you. I can't sleep with this suffocating cloud of doubt surrounding me. Marc, stop fighting our future together; embrace it!

Love now and forever,

Laura

Marc awoke at 7:49 AM. The front of his blue briefs were a gooey mess from a nocturnal emission, his first in five years. In the erotic dream, he and Laura were having sex on the Crab Park beach, just down from the high school. Right as he reached orgasm, a police car rolled up.

He took a shower, made some strong coffee, and then checked his Gmail account. He immediately saw Laura's e-mail with this subject line:

It's me, honey ... waiting ... just for you

He sighed. Then he clicked on the column line. Marc slowly read her correspondence, startled by her explicit candor and advanced reasoning. He pondered her alarming missive. *Oh, boy! How does she know about my ex-girlfriend? She's quite the tech-savvy detective. She's certainly one mature lass. But, she's only 16. And, she's completely immersed in fantasyland. What to do now? Continue to just ignore her entreaties? Absolutely. Must never respond. Should I forward this to the school principal to cover my ass? Let's think about this for a while. Maybe come up with a plan after drinking some java.*

This particular winter Saturday was very chilly, but there was no rain like the nonstop steady soaker of yesterday. Some actual rays of sun filtered through the horizontal blinds. Just as Marc switched on the small TV on the kitchen counter, there was a knock on the front door. *Ah, that must be UPS. [United Parcel Service] Yes! My vaporizer has arrived from Colorado. A perfect day to lounge around and test it out.*

Marc, certain of the person outside, opened the oak door without looking through the peephole. Standing right there was none other than pink-lipsticked Laura in black jeans and a black, zippered, faux-leather jacket. She had a dour look glued to her rouged face. *Oh, no! She's here. How did she find my address? How did she get here? Did someone drive her here? Who? Where are they now? Are we on camera?*

“Why didn’t you call me?” Laura sternly asked. “You could have at least texted me. Very inconsiderate, Marc.” *Is this really happening?*

“I’m so sorry; I, uh, was just going to,” Marc said with hesitation. *What in the world do I do now? Think!*

“Did you not get my e-mail?”

“Yes. Yes, I got it. I just read it, but haven’t had time yet to compose an appropriate reply.” *An appropriate reply?*

“Well, are you going to invite me in? It’s cold out here.” *She’s got me in a fix. She knows it. I’m trapped. Damned if I do; damned if I don’t. Oh, just let her come inside before the nosy neighbors notice her.*

“Ok, yeah, sure.” *Yes! I’m going to capture his heart. He’s Play-Doh® in my hands now. / How does this day end? Hopefully not in handcuffs.*

“Thank you, kind sir,” Laura said as she marched into the kitchen, which was just off the foyer. She immediately sat down at the table, awaiting Marc’s arrival.

Marc closed and locked the front door. His heart was pounding. He took a deep breath and slowly walked to the kitchen. *Is this my last day as a free man? Why is this happening to me? I’m no heart-throb type. I didn’t solicit this. This is a tragic movie, and I’m trapped in it. I’m going to be the fall guy. I can feel it.*

“What are we having for breakfast, dear?” Laura asked as Marc emerged in the kitchen archway.

“Uh, I have some frozen waffles. That’s about it.”

“That will be fine, honey.” *She’s psycho.*

“Laura, how did you get here?” Marc asked out of utmost interest.

“RTS. [Redwood Transit System] I jumped on the 9:14 [AM] bus in Loleta. It was only a half-hour ride. I don’t have to be back at the group home until five. We’ve got seven hours together, darling. Our first day date.” *Darling? Day date? Oh, no. Better think of something quick. Need to get her out of here and back to Loleta as soon as possible. Maybe drive her back after she eats the waffles. That way she won’t feel*

put out. Yeah, just pay her some attention and be nice to her. Humor her. Feign attraction. Maybe that will satisfy her. Hope so. Though, she sure is cute. She could easily pass for 17, or even 18, the way she looks right now. But, she's only 16. Don't forget that! Must resist temptation. Stay strong, boy. / I wonder if my man has any idea of what he's in for.

After a long pause, Marc placed the two heated waffles on a plate and walked towards the table. He set the plate down in front of Laura. They made eye contact. *Wow! She's so damn hot. Resist. Resist. Resist. / Yes! He's mine now.*

"Would you like any butter or syrup?" Marc asked.

"I'd like to taste your sausage syrup, Marc." *Oh, my.*

Marc gulped. "That's a yellow card, Laura. Do you want anything to drink?" *Hope she doesn't say semen.*

"I'll take a half-pint of your semen, sailor." *Oh, no! Resist. Resist. Resist. She's making this so hard. And now, it's hard. She just had to be a nascent nympho. What a test case. / My lover-to-be is way too tightly wound. Need to relax him.*

"Very funny, Laura. Seriously though, are you thirsty, pretty girl?" *He called me pretty! But, I'm not a girl. He knows that.*

"How about a cup of coffee, love doctor?" *Love doctor? Maintain nonchalant demeanor. Resist. Resist. Resist.*

"Sure. I think I'll have another cup, too." Marc then walked over to the coffee maker and reloaded it. Soon it was gurgling away. *After coffee, we have to leave. Or, I may lose control. May not be able to resist anymore. Might give in. / I've got him all tensed-up. Need to change that.*

Soon Marc was placing the coffees down on the table. Laura winked at him. *He wants me, and he will get me. / What a challenge of self-control this is.*

"Laura, I have to take a pee. I'll be right back." *Finally. My chance has arrived. / I hope I can urinate. I think I'm already oozing pre-cum. Where is the hyperspace button?*

When Laura heard the bathroom door close, she extracted a sachet that looked like a sugar packet from her purse. She sprinkled the fine granules into Marc's chocolate-colored coffee and gave it a few stirs with her spoon. *This should de-*

stress my studly mate. Just twenty minutes until I lose my virginity. Can't wait!

Marc soon returned to the table and took his seat, which was across from Laura. He sipped his coffee. "I think I made it a little too sweet this time."

Laura quickly got up and poured the bottom of the coffee pot into Marc's mug. "That should even it out, honey."

"Thanks." Marc then guzzled a big slug. "Yep, it tastes perfect. Great job." *Drink up, love!*

"Thanks, sweetheart." *She won't let up.*

"Young lady, can we have a frank, adult conversation?" *Yes! He said 'lady' and 'adult'.*

"Certainly, sexy." *She's not making this easy.*

"Laura, you are more mature than your years. I will readily admit that. However, you are still only 16 years old. You have a great future ahead. In just two years you would probably regret having a sexual relationship with me. You would most likely regret it for the rest of your life. Your teenage brain is still growing. Your adolescent mind is still developing. Your decision today wouldn't be the one you'd make if you were 18." *What prudish nonsense. Just wait a few more minutes. / Feeling drowsy. So very sleepy.*

Marc yawned. Then he consumed the remainder of his coffee. "Broken sleep last night. Maybe the coffee will wake me up and get me going." *I doubt that, my love.*

"Did you dream of me last night, Marc?"

Laura's question would go unanswered. Marc was now slouched-over in his chair. Six seconds later he was unconscious. *That Hard Asleep® [a date-rape drug for penile prowlers that combines a fast-acting rohypnol-like sedative with an erectile dysfunction medication] has knocked him out, just as advertised on that website.*

Laura then dragged Marc by his feet into the living room. She removed his green *Humboldt USA* T-shirt and placed it on the coffee table, right next to an ashtray that had a roach (the butt of a marijuana cigarette) in it. *Ah, I knew he toked.*

She took a puff. *Wow! My loverboy has the kind bud.*

After removing his slippers, she pulled down on his jeans. However, they were hung up on his stiffening erection. She completely unzipped them and slid them off. Then she pulled down his briefs. Marc's seven-inch (18 cm) wonder worm promptly popped out. His cock quickly became rock-hard as Laura performed felatio while vigorously rubbing her clitoris. *Yes! Phase two is working, too. This is going great.*

Marc's member soon came inside Laura's mouth. She tasted his man goo for a few seconds and then swallowed it. *Not as bad as feared.*

Four minutes later Marc's bronze penis was at full-staff once more. Laura mounted him. She let her moist vagina slide down his shaft. *Woah!*

Laura rode him hard and fast. At the 13-minute mark, she experienced her first male-organ-induced orgasm. She tingled. Her mind soared into uncharted realms. *Wow!*

Marc moaned, but couldn't catch consciousness as Laura rode his joystick to three more orgasms over the next 73 minutes.

Then suddenly, at 12:12 PM, the apartment shook. It was a moderate earthquake. The temblor toppled a large clay urn onto Marc's head. He died instantly. Never saw it coming.

The sharp jolts continued for 14 seconds, and then settled into rolling waves for 21 seconds. The physical damage was limited to broken glass items that fell from the shelves.

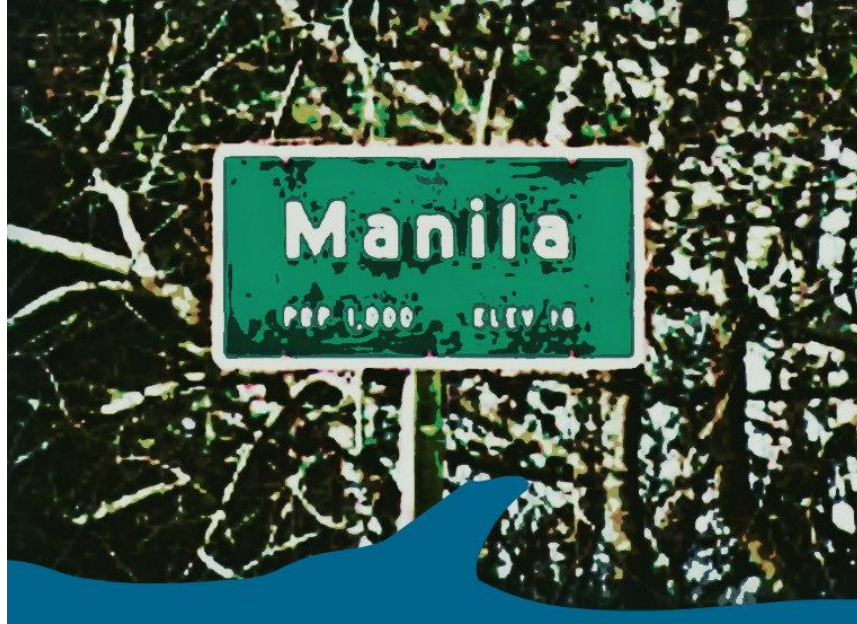
Laura was freaked-out by what had just transpired, but kept a remarkable steely composure. She retrousered Marc. Then she crouched down beside his lifeless body for a few minutes. She kissed him, tidied up, and then covertly exited.

On the late RTS bus back to Loleta, Laura despondently stared out the window. *Another tragic loss. So, what's new? That's how this life goes for people like me. Tragedy always hovers over us. I'd be foolish to call the police now. Really no need to. Eventually Marc's body will be found. Probably within a couple of days. Once he doesn't show up at school on Monday, they will notice his car at the apartment. The police will probably find his body on Monday afternoon. They will think that no one was there with him. A solo earthquake casualty. If they only knew what was going on beforehand.*

Will they be able to find out? I cleaned up everything pretty good. Doubt they do an autopsy. Cause of death is obvious.

Without warning the bus lurched violently to the right, as the driver swerved to avoid an aftershock-widened rift in the US 101 pavement. Unfortunately, he overcorrected. The bus then flipped over the galvanized steel guardrail and hurtled towards a muddy slough on South Bay, landing on Laura's side. Bodies got tossed about like ping-pong balls. However, most of the passengers would survive. Though, Laura would not be one of them. Her head was struck by a barbed-wire fence post.

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



The Other Manila by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | July 2017

The Other Manila

by Mike Bozart

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On a delightfully mild – weather-almanac-indicated-typical 61° (Fahrenheit; 16° Celsius) – ovation-overlapped overcast June afternoon, a Friday in 2017, Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) found ourselves on an RTS (Redwood Transit System) bus, headed to Eureka from ACV (the Eureka-Arcata airport) via California State Route 255. As we started to curve around the northwestern corner of Prussian blue Arcata Bay, I remembered that the little community of Manila lay just ahead. With Monique being a Filipina, I knew that she would be interested in adding this only-13-feet-above-mean-sea-level (four meters) bayside township to our nebulous North Coast itinerary.

“Want to get off in the other Manila, asawa?” [wife in Tagalog and Cebuano] I asked her. *Get off?*

“Sure, 33. Maybe we can find out how the little hamlet got off scot-free with that big-city name.” 33? *Scot-free? She knows that I’m recording. / Bana [husband in Cebuano] is already in audio-record mode. I can sense it.*

At about a quarter to five, we disembarked on a desolate Peninsula Drive and walked up to the Manila Community Center. However, it was closed. *Darn! / Oh, no.*

“We’re out of luck, 32.”

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

“Not sure, Monique.”

“When is the next bus, Lieutenant Lugnuts? [sic] Or, is there a next bus, 33?” *Gosh, are we going to be stranded here overnight? There’s no Uber or Lyft here. Where would we sleep? / Lieutenant Lugnuts? Ha! I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Could we possibly walk to Eureka? With her platforms, way too far. [3.8 miles (6.1 km) away] Don’t even think they allow pedestrians on the bridges. [They don’t.]*

“Well, let me pee first,” I said as I walked towards the free-standing restroom building. “Then maybe my brain can figure something out.” *Oh, boy.*

“I’ve got to go, too,” Monique disclosed. “I think I’m beginning to leak.”

Fortunately, the urination station’s doors weren’t locked. We relieved our bladders. Once back outside, we saw an RTS bus pulling up to the bus stop. It was a northbound bus that

was headed to Arcata. *Drats! That one is going the wrong direction. / Darn it! That bus came FROM Eureka. Now, when is the next bus TO Eureka? Hopefully soon.*

An older Asian man of slight build and an Asian boy of eight or nine years were the only passengers who stepped off the bus. They started walking towards us. *Maybe he knows.*

“Hello sir,” I said as the gap between us shrank to ten feet (three meters). “Would you happen to know when the next southbound bus arrives?”

“There are no more southbound buses stopping here today,” the venerable, still in good shape, gray-haired, brown-skinned, orange-ball-capped man said. *Oh, crap! That’s just great. / Why didn’t my bana research this first. Probably too busy daydreaming.*

“I see,” I said with an overt groan. *At least it’s not raining.*

“There is another northbound bus at 5:55,” he continued. “You can take that one to the Arcata Transit Center. Then you could get on a southbound bus that goes down [US] 101. Where exactly do you need to go?”

“Downtown Eureka,” Monique chimed. *He kind of looks like a pinoy. [male Filipino] / She certainly looks like a pinay. [female Filipino]*

“Filipina?” he asked Monique.

“Yes,” Monique answered. “I’m from Siquijor.”

“Ah, that small Central Visayan island province.”

“Yep. Where are you from?” Monique then asked.

“Luzon – Antipolo,” he replied.

“Very nice views of Manila from there,” my wife said.

“And, a little cooler,” I added.

“Yes, it is,” the late-60-ish Filipino American agreed.

“So, where are you guys headed?” I asked him.

“Up to the sand dunes behind the playground,” he divulged. “My grandson just got a new kite that he wants to fly. I think there’s more wind out there.” *Ah, so that’s what’s in the young lad’s hand.*

“Mind if we tag along?” Monique asked. “Looks like we have 53 minutes to kill thanks to my kano.” [Philippine slang for American] She laughed. *Zing.*

“Sure,” the elder Filipino American cheerfully assented.

“Salamat,” [thanks in Tagalog and Cebuano] I said.

“You know the dialects?” he asked me.

“Just a few words,” I answered.

“Just the bad words,” Monique clarified. *Zinged again. She’s up 30 – love.*

We three adults had a chortle. However, the Filipino American boy had grown bored with our conversation; he was intent on getting to the dunes as soon as possible to get his brand-new kite airborne. *All that grown-ups like to do is talk. Bleh!*

We then all walked, single file, past the playground and main building. Then a narrow loose-sand path led us past a patch of maritime forest. Eighty-eight seconds later, we had arrived at an area of mostly vegetation-carpeted sand dunes.

The eager chap marched up a dune that was maybe eleven feet (3.35 meters) tall. We all followed him. He stopped on the crest and unpackaged his kite. It was a cherry-red dragon with indigo outlines and white eyeballs with black diamond-shaped pupils.

“Awesome kite,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Keoni,” he softly stated.

“Keoni, just let me know if you need any help launching it,” I offered. “I have lots of experience in flying long kites off of short piers.” Crickets. *That attempt at humor bombed rather (un)spectacularly. / What did he just say? / Hubby with another certified klunker. [sic] I’m now up 30 – -15.*

Keoni, though, was consumed by the task at hand and just nodded. He was quickly assembling the six-to-seven-foot-long (two meters) nylon kite.

“How did this American township get the name of Manila?” Monique then asked the thin Filipino American gentleman.

“It got the name right after World War II,” he replied.

“For fighting alongside the United States?” Monique inquired.

“Quite possibly,” the man responded.

“Was it a Philippine encampment?” I asked, completely oblivious to the origin of the name.

“I’m not sure,” the jolly old fellow replied.

“Do many Filipinos live out here in little Manila?” Monique then asked.

“No, there are just five of us,” he stated. *Only five! / How strange.*

Keoni soon had his kite completely assembled. He then walked over to a sand dune that was maybe ten meters (33 feet) away. He stuck the rear point of the kite in the sand and then walked back with the spool of twine. *A future aviation engineer here. / Smart lalaki. [boy in Cebuano and Tagalog]*

Keoni then waited for a strong gust. Suddenly he gave the white string a sharp tug. Up the kite shot into the gray sky. It quickly climbed to around 150 feet (46 meters). *Impressive self-launch.*

“Nice job,” I commended Keoni.

“He’s pretty skilled at this now,” the older Filipino American relayed.

The dragon’s tail was whipping about like an agitated snake in the brisk onshore breeze. The menacing eyes made it look like something right out of a low-budget sci-fi flick.

“Your kite looks like a mumu, [phantom in Tagalog] Keoni,” Monique proclaimed.

Keoni just smiled. He was enjoying the debut of his new kite, as well the demonstration of his kite-flying skills to a pair of adult strangers. *Must not let it crash.*

I looked out at the nearby ocean. *Not sure if I could live here. The terrain is quite low and the tsunami risk is quite high. Though, I guess that little Manila has been lucky so far. They haven’t experienced anything like Crescent City [82 miles (132 km) north] did in 1964. Crescent City even suffered damage from that Japanese earthquake in 2011 – from all the way on the other side of the Pacific. That article in Slate [online magazine] said that it was the tsunami capital of the*

United States. Still, all it takes is one. A not-overly-massive tsunami could go right up and over these dunes and push little Manila into the bay. / Wonder what ominous, paranoid, natural-disaster thoughts my bana is having now. Guess I'll read them next month. / Wonder how these two met. When? And where?

"Do you like the climate out here?" I asked both of them. *I just knew that my hubby would ask a weather-preference question. Never fails.*

Keoni, still kite-preoccupied, slowly nodded.

The older Filipino American smiled. "I'll take the cooler weather here in little Manila over the steamy heat of metro Manila," he replied. "Even Antipolo is warmer now. Maybe global warming is real. It sure felt like it the last time I was there, back in 2013."

"Me, too," I concurred. "I wouldn't last long in big Manila. Granted, it's a mega-metropolis with many attractions and plenty of things to do, but the sauna-esque, never-a-non-hot-day weather is a deal-incinerator for me."

"He hates hot weather everywhere," Monique then informed.

We then quietly watched Keoni flying his dragon kite. He made it do barrel rolls with his left hand on the twine and his right hand on the spool. *This kid is really adept at this.*

"You're an expert kite flyer, Keoni!" Monique exclaimed. *I've impressed the grown-ups.*

Keoni smiled, but stayed focused on his kite. He then had it swoop down towards a distant dune, only to have it make a hard U-turn a yard or so (a meter) from impact. The dragon's head then screamed back up into the ash-colored, foreboding sky.

"You know, for a long time I thought that Manila was spelled with two l's – not one," I announced to break the silence.

"But, you realized your error once you met your cute Filipina, right?" the old man suggested with a grin. *Not exactly sure when I became aware of the correct spelling. / Cute? That was nice of him.*

"I guess it goes back to Manila folders," I resumed. "When I heard that term in grade school, I felt sure that there was a

double-I in Manila – like vanilla. The peculiarities that one remembers.” *Just you, bana.*

“Do you remember the last time that you were in the other Manila?” the senior citizen asked. *The other Manila? Just play along. Maybe a short story precipitates.*

“This Manila here – tiny Manila?” I asked to be sure of which one he was referencing.

He just smiled with a gleam in his dark eyes. *What’s going on here?*

Monique looked at me with a most-interested expression.

“I’ve never been to this Manila before,” I calmly confessed.

“It’s ok, it’s ok,” he repeated. *Maybe already touched by senility.*

“I haven’t accumulated the requisite unaccounted-for time,” I declared. *What?!*

“We’ve all had our other Manila moments,” he said. “It’s ok.” *That shemale nest. That wild threesome. With her sister.*

Once aboard the 5:55 RTS bus to Arcata, Monique looked at me. “About your ‘other Manila’ moments ...”

Suddenly, without any warning, the dragon kite crashed into the bus’s windshield.

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Samoa Sam by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | July 2017

Samoa Sam

by Mike Bozart

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Samantha Wevanski, a 25-year-old, Polynesian-Caucasian, athletically fit, dark-brown-haired, tan-skinned, avid bicyclist, who now just liked to be called Sam, began her Saturday trek on a mostly cloudy, misty yet mild, May morning in 2016. Her starting point was her adoptive Caucasian parents' home on Vance Avenue in the small North Coast community of Samoa (CA, USA). Per her usual semi-weekly regimen, she was wearing no makeup, but still looked patently feminine in her elastane cycling attire.

As Sam passed forlorn Cutten Street on her left and began a short climb up a large sand mound, she thought about the dilapidated storefronts. *Wonder when someone can make a go of it down there. Should I try to open a shop? Call it 'Boutique Nautique'? Just sell ocean-themed souvenirs? No, I'm sure that it would soon end up underwater. Tourists just don't come over to this part of the northern spit that much. Only the fire station seems to do well. That almost sounds like a comedy line. This corner place must have been a thriving garage and fuel station eons ago. A much different time back then. Maybe a tougher time. In so many ways.*

She mounted the rise with ease. Soon Sam was passing by barren sandy terrain where it appeared that structures had been razed. *Still looks the same as when we moved here. [2009] Wonder why everything was scraped off this former dirigible mooring site. Because airship use by the [United States] Navy declined after World War II? Are they planning to sell this parcel? Some great ocean-view real estate. Probably would fetch a pretty penny. Should ask dad about it later. Oh, I'll probably forget.*

Then, just before a bend to the right in the old asphalt road, she glanced at the tall stacks of de-limbed tree trunks in the lumber mill yard. Sam quickly looked back at the pavement, a second before she crossed over some old railroad tracks at a 45-degree angle on her three-speed. *When did I crash on these tracks? Was it 2012? Or, was it that wet morning in 2013? No, it was way back in October of 2011. 2011, 2012, 2013 – all now just quickly-passed-over four-digit numbers, sunk in the quicksand of the past. A whole year of human doings – and undoings [sic] – whispered away in a second. Like 1916. A hundred years ago. World War I was going at full throttle, but no American involvement yet. Phosgene. Chlorine. Mustard gas. Such a 'fragrant' flagrant trio. Wonder if any of those entrenched soldiers wondered about life in*

2016. Wonder if any of them thought that the best thing about life is that it ends – hopefully painlessly and quickly. Whew! I sure seem to have the darkest thoughts now. Enough of war. Think about something else, girl.

Soon Sam was passing a large, metal-sided, teal-painted industrial building on her right. A mid-30-ish, somewhat husky, dirty-blonde-haired, flannel-shirted white guy inside the perimeter fence waved to her, just like he did whenever he saw her approaching. He then winked. She just stoically half-smiled. *I'd love to nail Miss Fitness some fine day. Ram it right through her Spandex. Have her screaming in ecstasy. Oh, hell yeah! / I can tell that big boy would like to date me. I bet that he fantasizes about having sex with me. He wants to do me right there in the warehouse yard and unload all over my boobs, just like he sees on his porn sites. Sex. It sure leads to a lot of division, suspicion, double-talk, fear, shame and hostility. Sex. So craved. So desired. And yet, so derided. Please specify your sex. Please state how you sex. Are you an untamed – and completely unrestrained – wild animal during sex? If not, why not? If so, how dare you! Sex. Why are there even two sexes? I bet that sex one hundred years from now would freak out 80% of the adults of today – these neo-Victorians. I would bet that it will be normal for couples to have sex robots in the future. [the focus of the short story 'A Novella Idea'] Probably marriage savers. I bet bisexuality will be quite commonplace. Though, I myself seem to be sinking into asexuality. I'm done with dating, male and female. I guess I was cut from a different cloth – a solitary fabric. A lonely life awaits. Well, maybe just alone, but not so lonely. I wonder how my biological parents met in American Samoa. Was my real dad a higher-up in the United States government? Was my real mom just a menial laborer in his office who bent over to dust his desk? Wham-bam! Or, was she in some higher position herself? Was it a situation in which keeping me would have brought untold embarrassment onto both of them? Or, maybe worse – divorce(s)? Do they ever think of me? Do they think I'm still alive? Do they ever wonder whom I became? What have I become? Just a clerk at a vegan grocery store in Eureka [4 miles (6.4 km) southeast] with a useless associate degree in history. And, still living with my folks. Yeah, I really became something alright. Should I have just stayed in Shelter Cove [90 miles (145 km) south] with that living-in-a-rusting-shipping-container poet? No way! That dude was genuinely*

nuts, and getting nuttier with each rainy winter day. Also, his inheritance was quickly dwindling away. Though, I'll always be thankful to flipped-out Phillip for introducing me to Sara Teasdale. [an American poet popular a century ago] Ah, if only I could go back in time and meet her. Say, 1915 – the year that poignantly defiant poem ['I Shall Not Care'] was published. What a fearless poet she was. I need to start writing poetry again. It just may be therapeutic. Need an outlet for these starved-for-expression thoughts. Maybe something worthwhile becomes of it. Maybe.

Sam pedaled past LP Drive on her right, a short paved connector to New Navy Base Road, a highway that was best avoided, as she was almost run over by a not-paying-attention/too-busy-texting semi driver in 2015. *No, not taking that road again.*

Soon she was passing a sea-salt factory on her left. *Sea salt is all the rage now. Probably quite profitable. Just let the seawater evaporate. Another nice crop. Bag it. Box it. Ship it! Cha-ching! Maybe oversimplified.*

She kept pedaling, passing the old pipeline docking facility and a deserted Bay Street. At the T-intersection with Comet Street (on her left), the road changed names; Sam was now on Bendixsen Street. It looked about the same: still an old asphalt road splitting the swells of sand covered by short vegetation, interspersed with assorted tangible-product businesses.

When a soft right emerged, she took it. Sam was now on Lincoln Avenue, passing through another small residential area known as Fairhaven. There was no traffic, though. *Another pleasant northern peninsula Saturday, here in non-status-symbol land. Yes, this is definitely not a place that is about putting on airs. I do like that about this elongated sandbar. So atypical of coastal California. Nothing like Venice. [CA]*

Lincoln Avenue soon came to an intersection with the no-longer-avoidable New Navy Base Road; though, traffic was virtually nonexistent here. Sam turned left at the STOP sign, as she didn't want to go to the Samoa Drag Strip or Samoa Field Airport. *Dad sure loves those NHRA [National Hot Rod Association] drag races.*

Soon Sam was pedaling away with the North Bay Channel on her immediate left. *Good, no whitecaps.*

Next, she would pass the Samoa Boat Ramp, which only had one vehicle and boat trailer in the lot. *Wonder where the usual crowd of fishermen are today. Is it a bad tide?*

Then the road got rougher with more potholes to watch out for. Sam then forked to the right, leaving New Navy Base Road, which led directly to a gated entrance to the Humboldt Bay Coast Guard Station. *Wonder how long dad will work today. I bet he's home by noon.*

The unnamed paved road looped around the Coast Guard property, and then tied back into New Navy Base Road. At a just-up-ahead wooded picnic area on her left, Sam stopped and dismounted her bike. She then walked over to a thin slab of concrete next to a pool of rainwater. She slid the 28" x 28" (.5-square-meter) top off of a void. *Yes! It's still here!*

Sam extracted the deflated rubber lifeboat that her father had given her. It had become an expendable asset to the Coast Guard. Though the smallest size, it was still plenty big for her and her folding bike.

She then walked her bike, with the lifesaving raft and related apparatus on the seat, over to the north jetty. Sam noticed her bicycle's trip odometer hit 5.05 miles (8.13 km) as she maneuvered it up and over the riprap seawall. She looked across the channel towards the south spit. *Water looks pretty calm. 9:38. [AM] Just six minutes before slack tide. Not much – if any – current now. Maybe a slight current coming in when I return. Better than an ebb tide going out to sea. I should be ok. Hopefully not infamous last thoughts.*

Sam then deployed the canister of carbon dioxide (CO₂); the vulcanized rubber vessel was filled in just four seconds. The plastic oars easily snapped together. After removing a cotter pin in the hinged frame, lowering her seat, and turning and dropping the handlebars, her bike was compacted to one-fourth of its normal size. She carefully placed it in the craft with the CO₂ canister and stepped aboard. *Here we go.*

Sam quickly got a good rowing cadence going. She would make the 1,900-foot-long (579 meters) transit in 11 minutes. The crossing was surprising uneventful. A large fishing boat passed her midway, but the wake wasn't that bad; no water got in her salvaged life raft.

Once on the other side of the channel, she deflated her boat. Using an oar as a shovel, she buried it and the CO₂ canister in a patch of vegetation-less sand behind the restroom building. There were two vehicles in the picnic area's parking lot, but not a soul was seen. *Guess they must be hiking on, or fishing from, the jetty. Got lucky. So far, so good. Now, the adventure continues. Back to cycling.*

Sam unfolded and reset her bicycle. After drinking an electrolyte-rich beverage, she was pedaling south on South Jetty Road, which started out as gravel and sand. Humboldt Hill on her left caught her eye. *Up there sure would be a safe place, tsunami-wise. Though, this area hasn't been hit by a significant tsunami in ages. Such silly West Coast paranoia.*

After 77 seconds of cautious riding, the road became paved in old asphalt. *Ah, so much better. Glad that's over.*

A 25 MPH (40 km/h) speed limit sign appeared on her right. *Let's see if I can get this bike up to 25 MPH. It's flat. There's virtually no headwind. Let's do this. Burn those calories.*

In 220 feet (67 meters), Sam had her bike rolling at her target speed and then backed off to 17 MPH (27.4 km/h), as an old pickup truck was approaching and she didn't want to look manic.

The low-lying maritime chaparral reminded her of Scotland, which she had seen on TV while watching *The (British) Open* with her dad some fifteen years ago. She remembered her mom coming in the living room and saying, "Samantha, you're not old enough to watch golf; only old farts like your dad watch such uptight lunacy." *Uptight lunacy? How did my mom come up with that? Wonder if she quit teaching English at CR [College of the Redwoods, Eureka Campus] because I enrolled. Did I effectively end her career? Gosh, I hope she really quit for the reasons that she said. Yeah, my adoptive parents have been great. I'm really quite lucky, I guess. A sibling would have been nice, though. A lot of lonely times with just me and my imagination.*

Sam kept pedaling, but now at a more modest pace of 13 MPH (21 km/h). Humboldt Bay was an ever so slightly rippling bed of slate on her left. No one else was on the road. Sam's mind meandered as the slight breeze brushed the shrubs. *If you don't have a partner in life, you have to create your own singular goals. And, your own solitary happiness.*

Will I be able to do that for 50 or more years? Will it be enough? Will I crack up and go insane? Am I really now that relationship-averse? Or, am I just kidding myself? Who am I? Still not sure. And, still unsure of what I really want. Wish it would all fall into place and become crystal-clear. An epiphany or unambiguous sign by the end of this expedition would be wonderful.

Sam passed a gravel parking area on her right. There was a lone vehicle: a bronze-colored Jeep. However, no person was in view. *Such an incredibly desolate road. This would make a good setting for a horror movie. A young lady on a bike being chased by a madman. Why do I think such things? Must stay self-entertained, dear. Keep practicing.*

After passing another parking area on her right, which was completely vacant, a white work van ripped past her, only 11 inches (28 cm) from her left handlebar grip. *Woah! That was close. Way too effing close! That jerk has the whole road. So unnecessary. This world is chock full of annoying assholes now. And, they are the ones who are multiplying like rats!*

She mellowed after a few minutes. Then Sam noticed a brown Hunter Access Corridor sign on her left. *They allow hunters out here? What are they hunting? Cyclists like me? Ha-ha. I guess water fowl in, or at the edge of, the bay.*

Fifty-two seconds later, a tidal flat on Sam's left almost met the road. It reeked of dead crabs and rotting marsh grass. *Looks like low tide. Did I gaze at the wrong tide table?*

After passing another vacant parking area on her right, Sam knew that she was on the homestretch. She honed in on the dark hill just to the left of dead-ahead. *Almost there. This has been easier than I imagined. It's the flatness, almost like in Clearwater. [FL]*

Then Sam passed another parking area on her right. This one had a pastel-blue motor scooter parked in it. *Nice ride. Looks like a Vespa knockoff.*

The now-green, semi-wooded hill at 11 o'clock grew closer. Then a pair of tan-colored portable toilets appeared on her right. Sam pulled over. She had to pee. *Just what I needed.*

She hovered over the typically nasty opening in the foul-smelling tank. While urinating she read the graffiti that was scratched into the fiberglass wall. Between the political barbs

and crude sexual quips was a line that very much intrigued Sam; she mouthed the question:

What does April 6, 2014 mean now?

Sam pulled up her cycling pants and thought about it. *Did something significant happen on that date? I was in Samoa that day. The big earthquake was on March 9th of that year. There was damage, but nothing catastrophic. No tsunami. No big fires. Don't think there was a single fatality.*

While astride her bike, she pulled out her smartphone and researched that date in world news. Nothing really jumped out at her. *Maybe it was something personal. An anniversary? The date the lover/spouse left? Maybe a loved one died that day. Yeah, probably something like that.*

Sam continued her biathlon (cycling + rowing) workout. She soon reached a hard left turn. To her right was a beach-access parking area. She saw the white foam of the breaking waves. *How many waves have broken on that shore? What counts as a wave? What counts as 'that' shore? What maddening thoughts I have as of late.*

Then a steep climb began in earnest in the Mike Thompson Wildlife Area. Sam shifted to first gear and stood on the pedals. She wasn't going to walk her bike up the incline; she was determined to scale it on two wheels. *Hope the crest isn't much farther. What a heart-pumper!*

After a hairpin turn to the right, Sam closed in on her finish line: an observation turnout on South Jetty Road at Table Bluff County Park. Two minutes later she was sitting – catching her breath – on the small bench, looking northward. *Whew! What a majestic ocean view. There's where I was – the south spit. And, there's the bay. I think that's Fields Landing over there below Humboldt Hill. And, there's King Salmon jutting out way down the bay. Wonder if Lucy is awake yet. I bet she partied all night. She'll be hungover all day. Totally useless. Don't bother calling her today.*

After a ten-minute rest, she walked over to her bike and looked at the trip odometer. *Wow! 10.10 miles. [16.25 km] The second cycling leg was exactly the same distance as the first: 5.05 miles. Just like out of a crazy work of fiction.*

Then a raindrop landed on her nose. She looked over her left shoulder. Dark clouds were moving in from the west-southwest. *I better get going. Don't want to get soaked.*

Sam charged down the bluff. Her rear tire slid about an inch (2.54 cm) in the hairpin turn, but she quickly had it under control. After making the hard right turn at the bottom of the descent, she lowered her head and pedaled ferociously. She had a rising tailwind to help propel her. *Less than five miles until the water crossing. If I maintain 16 MPH (25.75 km/h), how long? About 18 to 19 minutes? Darn! Another raindrop.*

The northern sky ahead and the eastern sky over the bay on her right darkened significantly. To her left, a curtain of rain slowly advanced over a now-whitecap-strewn sea. Vehicles going the opposite direction passed her with their headlights on. *Must hurry. Let's try to move up to 18 MPH. [29 km/h]*

Sam would arrive at the terminus of South Jetty Road 17 minutes and 17 seconds later. She was nearly out of breath as she dismounted her bike at the restrooms. No vehicles or people were present. She guzzled the remainder of her energy drink. *Not too bad. Just a few leading-edge raindrops got me. Now to safely – and quickly – get across the channel. Time to find the oars and start digging.*

Her oar segments were quickly uncovered and reconnected. The flattened and folded boat was still there. Sam had it unearthed in 93 seconds. She brushed the sand off and hooked up the CO₂ canister. However, her rubber craft only partially inflated – to about 75% – before the gas ran out. *Darn it! Well, it still has enough buoyancy to float.*

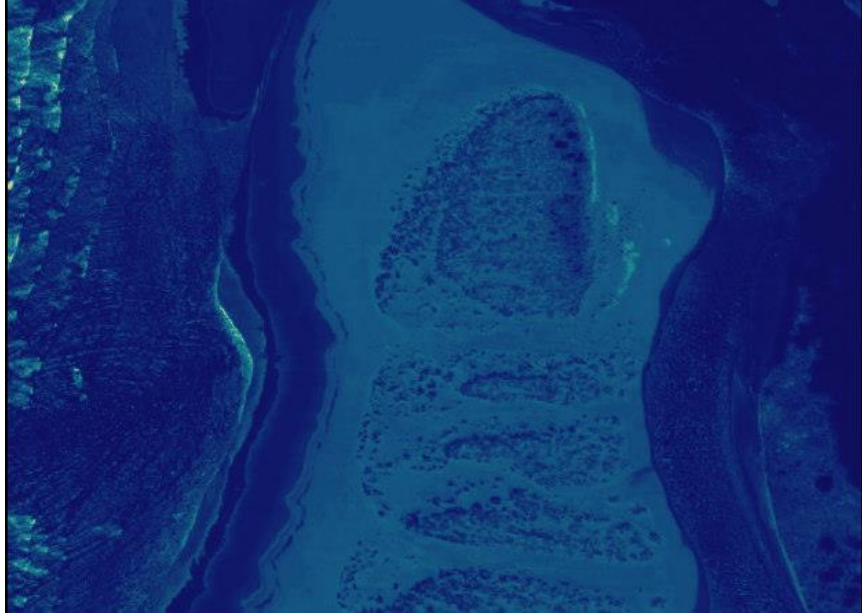
At a previously unrecognized sandy spot on the channel's shoreline, Sam refolded her bike and loaded it into the rubber boat with the empty CO₂ canister. She then got in and pushed off with an oar. *Strange. The tide is so unusually low. Is this a spring tide? Need to row fast. Must beat the rain.*

Off Sam went. The now-brisk breeze was still at her back; it noticeably helped. *Glad the wind is blowing my way. A headwind would make this transit much slower. And wetter.*

Just as Sam neared the halfway mark, she heard a roar to her left. A seven-foot-high (2.13-meter-tall) wall of seawater was charging towards her. Before she could react, her boat was literally surfing on the fast-moving wave. *A rogue wave? No it's a tsunami! Holy shit!*

Sam would crash into the rocky southern King Salmon jetty, flip over, get ensnared by the bicycle chain, valiantly attempt to free herself in the cold water ... and drown.

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Moonstone Moonchild by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | Aug. 2017

Moonstone Moonchild

by Mike Bozart

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Moonchild, a child of the moon; someone born under the zodiac sign of Cancer (June 21 – July 22). And, in common present-day parlance, a person who is a space case. Manda was both. And, yes, she had heard the 1969 song of the same name by the English progressive rock band King Crimson; in fact, she adopted it as her anthem.

On her 21st birthday, Caucasian American Manda found herself once again meandering about Moonstone Beach (CA, USA) in a beige, linen, full-length peasant dress. It was a foggy July 16th Sunday morning (2017). She was searching for those surf-rounded, alkali feldspar, pearly white, slightly translucent stones. With her head bent down, her thoughts flowed out. *'Playing hide and seek with the ghosts of dawn.' I'm the local lass who went nuts. That's what they think. I know they think that I'm crazy. I'm the girl who took too much acid (LSD) at the house party three years ago. 'She's just coo-coo, lost in her imaginary world, aimlessly wandering the beach.' Yeah, just let them think that. Today is a full moon. It's out there, pulling on the ocean. And, pulling me along. Need to play up the insane woman bit to the max. Most guys like an easy score.*

Manda lived in the nearby, mostly affluent, Westhaven community with Bruce, her now-hardly-ever-home, 52-year-old father. Her dad had received their modest, secluded, 1,111-square-foot (103-square-meter), three-bedroom house in some kind of real-estate swap, which Manda was very suspicious about; she wondered if it had something to do with illicit drugs. Her soft-spoken mom, Alice, had passed away from ovarian cancer four years ago. Her two-years-older brother, George, was now living in Sunnyvale (CA), working for a specialized software startup.

Crouched down with her long brown hair drooped over her face, Manda dragged her right hand through the cool wet sand. *If I find the right moonstone, it will be so irresistibly alluring. And, things will align. Just need some lunar luck.*

"Excuse me," a male voice suddenly announced. "Did you lose something?"

Manda looked up at the stocky, rusty-blond-haired, mid-20-something, well-tanned Caucasian gentleman. "Oh, I'm just searching for moonstones."

“Having any luck?” the young man asked. His light gray sweatshirt had a big, red, bold Stanford University **S** on it.

“Not yet, but the day is young.”

“Care to take a short break and join me for a coffee or hot tea at the Moonstone Café? They are having a special once-in-a-blue-moon early opening today.” *Was I too forward? / Blue moon? Is it one? He’ll get the special alright.*

“Ok, sure,” Manda replied. *Yes! I know that I can get in her pants – or up her dress – if I play my cards right. She’ll be eating out of my lap. / Stanford. I bet he’s from a rich – and über-smart – family. Did he ace the SAT? [Scholastic Aptitude Test] No, he’s probably not ‘that’ smart.*

“Great. It’s my treat.” *We shall see about that.*

They walked, side by side, over to the little beachfront restaurant that was only 35 yards (32 meters) away. They were seated at a two-top next to a large picture window.

Manda and the fairly handsome young man gazed at the beach. It was low tide. The nearest sea stacks were not even touched by the Pacific Ocean at the moment.

Then Manda looked across the table at her impromptu admirer. “So, what’s your name?” *I bet he was a frat boy in Palo Alto. [CA] / She certainly has a nice rack. Hopefully I’ll be feeling it and more before too long.*

“Oliver, but you can call me Ollie,” he stated in a businesslike manner. *A jolly Ollie by golly. I bet he had sex with a cheerleader. Or, wished he did.*

“Oh, my name is Manda.” *So mandacious. [sic]*

“Tell me, Manda, are moonstones worth a lot of money?” Ollie eyed her cleavage.

“They’re just classified as semiprecious, and on the lower end of the scale at that. But, I don’t sell them.” *Hmmm ...*

“So, what do you do with them?”

“I arrange them,” Manda answered as their coffees arrived.

“Arrange them?” *She’s even more whacked-out than I thought – a real space cadet. Wonder who looks out for her. Anyone? Does she have a boyfriend? Doubt it.*

"Yes, I arrange them in a special, secret garden." *She's certifiably bonkers. Though, she sure is cute. Sexy body. Need to make myself become her moon god.*

"A moon garden?" Ollie asked.

"Yes, a moon garden," Manda replied. *I bet she's all into astrology and the zodiac. Probably into tarot cards and mysticism, too. I'll just pretend to believe. / I can tell that he thinks I'm just another Northern California frosted flake. That's fine.*

"Does this moon garden exert any supernatural powers?" *What a ridiculous question.*

"No supernatural powers, Ollie. But, it does lend clues."

"So, at some time in the future, the clues must be returned, right?" *Huh?*

"What?" Manda had no idea of what he was talking about.

"You said that your moon garden lends clues."

"Oh, a stickler for meanings, are you? Say, would you like to see my secret, semi-sacred moon garden tonight, Ollie? Maybe glean an insight into your life's trajectory." *Semi-sacred? Insight into my life's trajectory? Oh, this is going to be too easy. Just like taking candy from a baby.*

"Why, sure. Where and when?" *And then, how and why.*

"Meet me here at 11 PM, and I will lead you to it. That's not too late, is it?" *I do have some spreadsheets to review before Monday morning, but I can't pass this up. Easy casual sex doesn't come along that often.*

"No, that's fine," Ollie enthusiastically confirmed. "But, this restaurant closes at 10 tonight, Manda."

"Ok, I'll be in the beach parking lot at 11 sharp. It's safe to park there after hours. The police won't ticket you." *Good.*

"Ok, whatever you say, mysterious moon lady." Ollie smiled at her ... a little too long. *He's quite winsome. But, he's a wee cocksure. / This young lady is in for it. I'm going to wear her ass out. Can hardly wait.*

The bill for a whopping \$4.48 arrived. Ollie promptly paid it, leaving an overly generous \$10 tip. They then went their

separate ways: Ollie via an expensive Porsche 911 Carrera; Manda by hemp-fiber sandals. *He's probably already making six figures. Probably an IT [Information Technology] whiz. / She's very trusting. So naïve. And, so in for it.*

Ollie headed directly to a costume shop in Eureka (20 miles – 32 km – south) near Bayshore Mall. He would find a white, whole-moon-shaped, pull-over-the-head, glow-in-the-dark adult mask that even had craters on it. *Manda's going to love this. 'Meet manic Máni, [the Viking moon god] ... and his moonstone-hard lunar dong, Manda.'*

As Manda walked along a densely wooded Scenic Drive towards Westhaven Drive South, her mind wondered about the night ahead. *I hope that he's not a violent type like the last one. No, I don't think so. Ollie seems like an all-American, red-blooded, basic-as-sliced-white-bread kind of guy. Probably still prefers American cheese. I know that he wants to have sex with me. He thinks that I'm an easy lay. Quite typical. But, he's never going to forget my moon garden. He'll never doubt its power. Never. Ever. Again.*

At 10:59 PM on a now-clear night, Ollie rolled into the Moonstone Beach parking lot. He parked his red sports car facing the ocean. *Hope she didn't chicken-out on me. Viagra single pack? Check. Condoms? Check. We're good to go. Don't be a no-show, Manda.*

Manda, who had been sitting on the front porch of a closed-up and shuttered, wood-sided, one-story, former-restaurant-appearing structure, walked up to Ollie's door. She lightly tapped on his side window.

Ollie, startled, snapped his head around. He smiled at her. She winked back. *I bet that we're having wild sex by midnight. Make that 11:45. / I can sense his lusty thoughts.*

The sleek car door opened. Ollie stepped out with his moon mask in an opaque plastic bag. He was immediately awestruck by Manda's black lace dress that was almost see-through. *This is going to be a great night. I'm going to piston-pump her into a new orbit. / I know that he craves my body.*

"Hello again, handsome," Manda said with a flirtatious smile. "Shall we proceed to my moon garden?" *Yeah, she wants it, too. Most excellent. This is going great.*

“Sure, lead the way, moon goddess,” Ollie replied. *Moon goddess? So sweet of him.*

“Ollie, may I ask you to leave your cell phone in your car?”
Am I being set up? Am I going to be rolled by her moon goons? Oh, just relax.

“Sure. No problem. The damn thing annoys me anyway.”

“Why allow unnecessary distractions on this magical night?”
Magical night? Oh, yes! We’re in like Flint. Or, did my granddad say ‘In like Flynn’?

“Precisely,” Ollie concurred.

They then started walking northward up the beach. The only sound was that of the crashing waves on their left. After about 600 feet (183 meters), they reached a rivulet that cut across the sand and drained into the sea. *Now, what? / Yeah, I feel it; good, I’ve got it.*

“Time for the blindfold, Ollie. I’ll carry that bag for you. Remember, it’s a secret garden. Don’t worry; it’s a short walk from here. And, it’s not up the creek; your feet will stay dry. And, I promise not to lead you off a cliff.” *What!*

“Well, that’s mighty nice of you,” Ollie retorted. He then put the black blindfold on. *What am I in for now? / Glad he’s compliant.*

Manda then led him by the hand up an incline through the maritime forest. They walked towards Mawby Lane, where Manda and her dad lived, for about 170 feet (52 meters). Ollie felt the redwood needles as they occasionally brushed against his hands and face. *Where in the world are we going? Hope this isn’t some kind of bizarre robbery-murder. No, I don’t think she harbors such malice.*

Then Manda stopped. “Ok, you can take the blindfold off now, Ollie.” *Thank God! Glad that no one whacked me in the back of the head.*

“Thanks,” Ollie replied with a sigh of relief.

“My moon garden is right over here,” Manda informed him.

Ollie then followed Manda to a small, level, cleared area. There was an oval of moonstones, about a meter (yard) in length, glimmering under the full moon. In the middle was a

circular, bone-white, convex object. *So, this is it. Poor thing. This isn't even a fair contest. This is going to be like balling a mentally incompetent ward of the state.*

"So, what does your moon garden do?" Ollie asked.

"Remember what I said, silly? It lends clues." *His mind is just focused on my body. It's so obvious. The male brain is so easily distracted by a seemingly ready and willing female.*

"Oh, yes! Yes. Now, how could I forget? So, what do I have to do to be lent a clue? How much does your little racket cost, Manda?" *Racket?*

"Oh, it's no hustle, Ollie; it's totally free. All you have to do is jump from the outside of the oval onto the center stone with your hands at your side while looking up at the full moon." *Piece o' cake.*

"Broad jump?" Ollie asked for clarification.

"Yes, a broad jump is best for getting the whole effect." *Whole effect? Boy, this chick must have ate some bad [San Pedro] cactus. It's really kind of sad. But, I can have pity for her later. After I ball her for three hours. Glad I remembered to bring the Viagra reinforcement. All set for a long pounding.*

"Can I do it as Máni the Norse moon god?" *He did some research. Very impressive. More esoterically curious than I thought. I underestimated this one. Still, the moon makes her request. Must not disappoint her.*

"Why, sure!" Manda exclaimed.

"Bag, please," Ollie requested.

Manda handed Ollie his cobalt-blue shopping bag. He then extracted and donned the moon mask. *Wow! What a visage.*

"Bravo! Splendid! Lady Luna [Spanish for moon] will love and cherish you even more, Ollie. She will never forget you." *Just play along. Just play along. Just keep her happy. Fun times are merely minutes away.*

"Do you like it, Manda?" *Wish I could snap a pic. But, I can't.*

"Very much! I love it, Ollie. Are you now ready to take your leap of lunar faith? Ready to see where your life is going?"

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. Yes, I’m all set, Manda. Ok, here goes!” *Hope I don’t have to step on his fingers.*

Ollie then leapt and landed right on the centerpiece. And immediately fell into a dark void. He dropped 13 feet (four meters), landing feet-first on cool, damp, soft, loamy earth. *What the hell just happened? Where the fuck am I? Am I in an abandoned well? [reference short story ‘The Well’.] Think I sprained my left ankle. But, nothing broken. Thank God.*

“Welcome to my oubliette, monsieur,” [mister in French] Manda announced from above. Her facial expression was now deadpan. “Always room for one more. And, we’re always in need of one more. The moon, well, she is very demanding. Pulling those tides around the Earth night and day is oh-so-tiring.” *Oh, crap! She’s a psychopath – a psychopathic entrapper! Am I going to be a lunar sacrifice due to this lunatic? Think of something. Fast!*

Ollie’s last image of the above-ground world was Manda’s moonlit head. As she screwed the round hatch back onto the narrow opening of the Cold War-era bomb shelter, Ollie frantically screamed for help. However, no one heard him.

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



The Vision by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | Aug. 2017

The Vision

by Mike Bozart

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Nick awoke bemused. After arriving home from work (commercial plumbing), he had taken a late Friday afternoon nap in his rented single-wide mobile home near Clam Beach (CA, USA). In a very-real-feeling dream, he was walking along the in-the-vicinity Little River, when he suddenly found himself in a lush-and-emerald-green-like-Ireland meadow. A Caucasian farmer then came up to him – seemingly from out of nowhere – and handed him a sheet of paper. Nick, a thirty-four-year-old Dutch American, zoomed in on the image. It appeared to be a detail of a USGS (United States Geological Survey) topographic quadrangle. For some unknown-to-him reason, the farmer then began to gesture with his hands as if he were perplexed, but he didn't say anything. Nick thought: *Is he mute?*

Then Nick looked back at the unlabeled physical map. The contour lines started to pulsate. The shading intensified. A voice – was it in his head? – spoke up. “This is where a gold nugget weighing almost 49 troy ounces [1.524 kg] is not-so-deeply buried. It's on this map, right at the confluence of two streams. Now, go out and claim it before someone else does!” *Troy ounces?*

Nick turned to the left, as he thought that the farmer might have been the one talking, but he had vanished; the old man in faded, oil-stained, holey denim overalls was nowhere to be seen. And then, the hill off to his right seemed to be smiling. A dipping gully then winked at him. The dream ended with a ferocious gust of wind that swept across the field, creating surface waves. *What a strange, surreal dream that was. Did Dietrich sprinkle something in my weed? [marijuana] If so, hope it's nontoxic.*

His cell phone, which was on the oak coffee table, then rang. Nick grabbed it. “Hello, Ed. What's up?”

“Want to go out for a few beers tonight, Nick?”

“Yeah, sure. Where?”

“Clam Beach Tavern.” [2.8 miles – 4.5 km – south-southwest in McKinleyville]

“Ok, let me guess, Ed: You're angling for the new brunette.”

“How did you know?” Ed chuckled.

"I know your weaselly ways. No need to be coy, Roy." *Just listen to me?*

"See you at nine, Nick?"

"You got it. Later."

At a regulars-starting-to-pile-in 9:19 PM, black-haired Nick and blonde-haired Ed were playing a game of 9-ball on a billiard table in the back of the bar. The solid-purple 4-ball fell into the near side pocket. *Wow. Ed finally made a delicate cut shot. He seems really focused tonight.*

"Nice shot, Ed," Nick said.

"Thanks, man," Ed replied.

"So, when are you going to make your move on Veronica?"

"Probably just before closing time," Ed said as he took another shot. However, the solid-orange 5-ball rattled out of the corner pocket.

"Pretty risky strategy, my friend," Nick countered. "V-ron [Veronica] may no longer be available by night's end."

Ed just grinned.

Nick sank the 5. And then, in rapid succession, he knocked in the 6 and 7 balls. The solid-black, white-eyed 8-ball was left on the lip of the far corner pocket. "Darn!" Nick exclaimed. "Could we please have a minor temblor right about now?" *What?! / Temble-tumble. [sic]*

"Never joke about earthquakes – not in California," Ed warned as he bagged the essentially-a-gimme 8-ball.

"Do you really think that my remark will increase coastal Humboldt County seismicity, Ed?" *I sure hope not.*

"Nick, it's just not wise to tempt fate – the calamitous kind of fate, that is." Ed then pushed the yellow-striped 9-ball just wide of the side pocket. However, it came to rest a centimeter ($\frac{2}{5}$ of an inch) off the rail. *It's safe there.*

"Ed, do you believe in visions?" *Wonder what Nick ingested this time. Or, has he gone wacky-religious? Is a recruiting pitch coming next?*

“Did you eat some [mescaline-containing] peyote buttons and join a cult, Nick?” Ed had a laugh. A few nearby patrons looked at him.

“No, nothing like that, Ed. It was a vision in a dream.” Nick then missed a long and difficult corner-pocket shot.

“A vision in a dream? How about a vision in a dream wrapped around a real-life hallucination? Something like that *Waking Life* animation film.” *Ah, that moment on a Gulf of Mexico oilrig when Richard Linklater had that filmmaker-is-my-true-calling epiphany. Wonder when that was precisely. Should I tell Nick that I’m writing screenplays now? Nah, not yet; just sit on it for now.*

“Ed, I’m serious.”

“Ok, what was the vision in the dream, Nick?”

“It was a section of a topo map – a very detailed section – somewhere along Little River. I think it was up near Crannell. [3.4 miles – 5.47 km – north of the tavern] When I looked at it in the dream, a voice said that a nice-size gold nugget could be found at the confluence of two streams, and at a shallow depth”. *Oh, dear. He’s coming unglued again.*

“Ha! Not only a vision in a dream, but a vision with a voice in a dream. My dear pal, I think you now may be schizophrenic. There’s medication for it, Nick. My cousin in West Virginia is schizoid to the max. But, when he’s on his meds, he’s perfectly normal.” Ed then sank the 9-ball in the far side pocket. “Game, set, match.” *He sure is feeling his oats.*

“Ok, thanks for humoring me, Ed. I’ve got to roll. Here’s a fiver for that last beer.”

“So early? Don’t you want to see me put the smooth moves on our new bartender?” *More like drunken pestering.*

“Uh, no; that’s ok, Ed. Message me the highlights tomorrow.”

“I bet that you’re going to get a new 9-volt battery for your old metal detector?” *How did he guess?*

“Hey, good luck with V-ron.” *I know Nick. He’s up to something.*

“Thanks, buddy,” Ed said.

“See ya later.”

Nick exited the pub. He stopped at a convenience store on his way home. At 10:22 PM Nick was back in his pea-gravel driveway. The September (2016) night air was cool. Some moonlight tried to pierce through the overcast sky as he finger-pecked his smartphone. *Let's see ... \$1,447/troy ounce x 49 = \$70,903. Wow! \$71K. Time to go inside and examine topos on a larger screen.*

Soon Nick was on his semi-ancient desktop computer, honing in on enlarged topographic images along Little River. He sipped on a local dark beer and took a puff from his pipe. Then he advanced the zoomed-in area to the west. He was amazed at what he saw. *There it is! That's the junction of the streams! The exact angle! Those are the streams. The confluence mentioned in the dream is where Raccoon Creek merges into Little River. That's got to be it! No doubt about it. A perfect match – identical. Now, when is the best time to look for that nugget? Not sure if I'm going to be able to sleep now. Maybe slip out after midnight. The sky will be clearer then. Will have more moonlight. But, still bring a flashlight. And, don't forget the metal detector! Nor, the earphones. Can't take the truck, though. Nowhere to park it on Crannell Road. The cops would have it towed away in ten minutes. Let's see ... A mile and half [2.41 km] away. That's a little long – and would be very suspicious-looking – for a walk toting a metal detector. I know – I'll use the old mountain bike! Yeah, it will be perfect. I can stash it in the woods, just off the road. The bankside walk from there to the 'golden Y' is only 725 feet. [221 meters] Yep, we've got this.*

After consuming a microwaved frozen burrito, Nick strapped the metal detector to the top tube of his 15-speed bicycle frame. He let the earphones wrap around his neck like a scarf. The flashlight holster was clasped onto his belt. *We're all set. Fingers figuratively crossed. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Plus some other clichés. 'And, he's off.'*

Nick pedaled hard. Only one vehicle passed him: a loud dually pickup truck. He would arrive at his bike-drop spot in 5:05. He then expeditiously tucked his green bicycle under some brush, about 20 feet (six meters) off the two-lane road. *First phase completed. A success. Next, a little riverside walk. 'Little River. Big winner.' Well, let's hope so.*

There was a faint fox path on the bank's edge. The walk was not difficult; the only obstacle was a fallen sycamore tree.

Three minutes later Nick was staring at the sandbar that was created by deposition from Raccoon Creek. *It's in that sandbar. I know it is. Looks like we may have to get wet. A pair of chilly feet will certainly be worth it.*

Nick began splashing his way across the calf-deep stream, utilizing slightly submerged boulders. But, he slipped into a hole and the water level rose above his kneecaps. He managed to keep his metal detector dry by holding it horizontally. Soon he was standing on the spit of sand, gravel, and sundry pebbles. *Woah! That water is cold!*

He donned the earphones and clicked on the metal detector. Nick began sweeping the coil back and forth just above the sandbar. No beeps. But then, 29 seconds later, a bold low tone. *That's it! That's got to be the nugget. The depth meter says that it's 20 inches [51 cm] down. That's deeper than expected. Damn! Forgot to bring a spade. Just use a stick.*

Nick noticed a fallen branch on the bank. He grabbed it and snapped it over his right thigh. *Nice tapered edge. Yeah, this should work just fine.*

After digging to a depth of about one foot (30 cm), he heard a dog barking. The hound was getting closer. *Wouldn't you know it! Just my luck – or, lack thereof. Guess I need to abandon the digging and hide. Where? Or, should I make a run for the road across the field? It's only 200 feet [61 meters] to that big curve. Yeah, let's get the hell out of here before we get charged with trespassing.*

Nick would safely make it to Crannell Road. He would also safely make it back to his bicycle, and back home.

While lying in his double bed, he thought about his next move. *I'll just go back there tomorrow night. Only this time, I'll bring that short shovel. I know where to dig, so I can leave the metal detector at home. Yeah, that's it. I'll have that nugget unearthed in two minutes max. I'll be in and out before Fido gets a whiff of my scent. Yeah, we've still got this; we're still bringing home the jackpot.*

Sleep finally overtook Nick's restless mind at 3:33 AM. He would not awake until noon. And, even then, Nick still felt groggy. He yawned and switched on the local TV news. An attractive, 30-something, Asian female reporter was interviewing an older Caucasian man who looked very much

like the farmer in yesterday's dream. They were standing in a verdant pasture. *That field looks familiar. Eerily familiar.*

"And, exactly how much does it weigh?" the reporter asked as a gust of wind blew her long black bangs across her face.

"After it was all cleaned up, the nugget came in at 53.2 ounces," [1,508 g] the farmer answered, brimming with pride.

"Now, what made you think to dig in that specific location?"
Oh, no. What's this? No, don't tell me ...

"I had a vision; it was in my dream last night," the beaming farmer replied. "I saw my good-luck canine, Leprechaun, digging down by the river where a tributary flows in from the north. I saw his claws scratching a yellowish rock. The rock was soft; his intense digging was leaving marks on it. Then I recognized the exact spot. After breakfast I headed out to the site. And, sure enough, Leprechaun had dug all the way down to a kidney-shaped three-pounder. All I really had to do was pluck it out." *All 'I' really had to do was pluck it out.*

As a close-up of the gold nugget appeared, Nick disgustedly turned off the TV. *Un-fucking-believe-a-bull. [sic] Why did this have to happen to me? Face it, dunce; you blew it. Spectacularly. Won't ever forget this. A once-in-a-lifetime chance. Is gone. Came up eight inches [20.3 cm] short. Just short of the goal line. And, eight minutes wanting. If I just would have had eight more minutes. If bad-luck Leprechaun would have just stayed asleep. If the wind would have blown east. If, if, if ... 'Sorry, no grand prize for you, Nick van Pech.'*

Then Nick's cell phone chirped. He had received a text message from Ed.

V-ron and I hit it off. Early and often. All night long. She's one fine lady. She moved here from Portland – the other one – Maine. Oh, did you see the big local news story – the gold nugget found by the farmer? It was just on TV. If not, Google it. Now, get this – V-ron said that her friend sold the sheepdog to that farmer last year. Crazy, right? Any luck finding your gold nugget? Call me when you get a chance, prospector.

<bang>

Note: Other tales involving buried/hidden gold include *Gold, a summer story* (a deceptive, suspenseful, X-rated, noiresque novel), *Gold, the short story* (PG-13 rated), and *The Mound* (a G-rated short story).

Thanks for your mind-time!

p.s. I've written many other short stories, novelettes, novellas, and a novel.

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