

PSECRET PSOCIETY PSHORT PSTORIES

vol. I (2010-15) by mike bozart (agent 33)

[[[]]] ... *from the inside virtual flap* ...

Here within are four dozen short stories – one is actually a novelette – that run the gamut from the marginally meta-real to the sometimes surreal to the oddly ordinary. Most clock in around 1,500 words.

The two primary characters in these tales of extricated intrigue are Agents 32 and 33 of a nebulous entity known as psecret psociety (yes, with silent p's). Agent 33 is the author (Parkaar) and Agent 32 is the author's wife (Monique).

So, if you find yourself needing to have some interesting (or at least different) reading material to fill those thirteen-to-seventeen-minute gaps in your day, this may very well be your ticket to slide ... into knowhere. [*sic*]



**PSECRET  
PSOCIETY  
PSHORT  
PSTORIES**

Vol. I (2010-15)

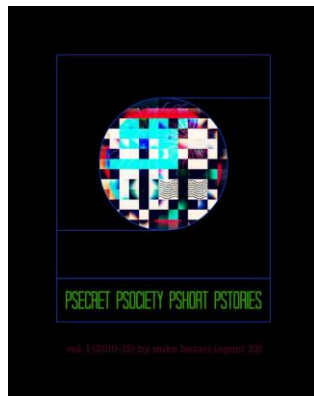
by Mike Bozart

4-H Edition

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And now for some somber legalese ...

First and foremost, this collection of short stories is a volume of fiction, and is not a factual account of any slice of the space-time continuum on Earth or anywhere else. Names, characters, places, events, incidents, and situations are either the product of the author's warped imagination or are used in a purely and wholly fictitious fashion. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or their otherworldly spirits, or any locales or proprietary objects, is entirely, and without exception, coincidental.



cover art by M. van Tryke

*This collection of tales  
is dedicated to those  
of you who pause  
to gratuitously ponder  
on the accumulated dust  
on the shoe molding  
on cold-floor mornings  
while the faucet*

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## *Foreword*

So, now it's a collection of somewhat strange, curiously pedestrian, and often inside-outed short stories. Yes, a lot of recursion looping around in these scripts. Well, if nothing else, they got my mind off of my painful roids [*sic*] for a while.

I went ahead and printed them out. Yes, all four dozen. They are all over the desk. Some are on the coffee table, doubling as coasters. The coffee mug stain on the cover image is like a brown corona. A perfect concentric ring. Oh, and some are still in the bathroom. Perfect reads while on the crapper.

It's not O. Henry by any stretch. There are some sparse stretches. Vacant terrain ... for mental meandering?

Yes, I could see the 'For Let' signs (recalling my British vacation), but just wondered where the previous tenants were now. And that wasn't getting me any closer to a paid lunch. Furthermore, I can't afford any more expensive time off. This should give you a hint of what's in store.

Well, there ya go. I start reading one these short stories and the lines for a short story come out like wine from a leaking oak cask. Maybe that was the desired effect. Maybe this is all encouragement. I think I'll try my hand at this in the near future. I sure have enough notes now to mash up some fine typographic mess.

You know, speaking of wine, it's that time. I sure hope that I didn't drink all of the \$5.99 Merlot last night. But, judging by this hangover, I think I did.

Hey, you could do worse things. We all could. But, let's not.

- Herman S. Goetze, [Taos, New Mexico]

## *Preface*

Short stories. Poems expanded. Novels reduced. Succinct structures that spare the author's blitheful blathering (if we're lucky). Perfectly sized literary vessels for this hectic, not-much-time-to-spare modern world. Pardon me, my cell phone just beeped.

Yes, I love the 1500-meter race. I mean, the 1500-word pace. It's a nice distance. A nice section of the stream.

I really enjoy composing them so that every word fits just right. An economy of tale. Ok, maybe there are a few misshapen clunkers. And, maybe I leave out just one piece of the puzzle and claim that the forever-staring-at-me dog ate it. I just know that you will find it ... and place it into your own teeming morpheme tapestry.

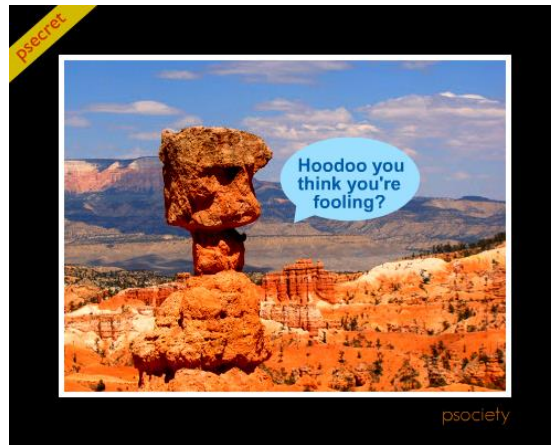
These 48 tales were posted offline and online, independent of each other. Thus, some characters are explained in brackets and parentheses ad nauseam (e.g., Parkaar, my ailing alias). So sorry about that.

The history of the mystery. After writing a series of short stories under the still-obscure psecret psociety flag from 2010 through 2015, I decided to round up these little literations [*sic*] and assemble them chronologically into one Old English sheaf.

I hope you enjoy them, and I surreally hope they spark some dormant neurons in your bean. If so, I'll consider it a successful mission with an anonymous accomplice of the highest order (you). Well, one never knows; but, two ...

## *Acknowledgments*

The author would like to duly recognize and sincerely thank the effectible atoms and the spaces between.



“No one likes an extraneous epigraph.”

– Galerie Parcouer

## 1. **pselling rewls** (early 2010)

One of the first things that Ernie the electronic earwig (our rancid ringleader) considered doing after creating psecret psociety – the meta-real storybook playground featured on Facebook – in 2010 (after Café 23 metaphorically burned to the unsound ground) was creating our own written language. Crazy idea, I know.

Well, we were still going to type in English; we were just going to alter the spelling of certain words. We knew that some would say it was just a goony gimmick. We anticipated this and sharpened our salient hooks.

First up, the only suggestion that got unanimous approval: lead off all words that begin with an s with a silent p. For example, science would be spelled *pscience* and the word spelling would become hyper-correct as *pspelling*. Psychology would not become *ppsychology*, though. We figured a double silent p would be a bit much, even for our motley mental lot.

I will now enumerate some spelling proposals – in chronological order, just like they had calendar eyes – that failed to get etched in stone. Some got a majority of support, only to be quashed by a lone veto (which any agent could secretly and anonymously submit). In such case, agents were still welcome to use these unapproved and non-promulgated spelling patterns in the name of merry linguistic mayhem. (Agent 14 has proved to be a first-order master at this.)

Well, the proposal that I, Agent 33, promptly submitted to the ear room, as we fondly call Ernie's micro-office, was to spell words ending with or containing ool and ule as ewl. For example, let's use this capricious sentence: Charlene, one cool magical lady with a new smartphone from the changing city, saw the foolish schoolboy eat a crimson toadstool.

When we combine the official silent p rule with the non-official ewl rule we arrive at: Charlene, one cewl magical lady with a new psmartphone from the changing city, psaw the fewlish pschewlboy eat a crimson toadstewl.

Next, there was a radical suggestion to do away with the letter c altogether. Startling, I know. A hard c would be spelled with a k; a soft c, with an s. The hard ch digraph (as in march) would be spelled with a strikethrough of a leading brace: {̄. Über-zany, for sure.

Additionally, the soft ch digraph (as in chandelier) would become sh. The ck digraph (as in kick) would be spelled kk. The cl and cr digraphs would become kl and kr, respectively. And, finally, the trigraphs sch and chl would become sk and kl, respectively and respectfully.

When Charlie got wind of this extreme notion, he blew up our cell phones.

Hey agents, please kill this worthless nonsense. I don't want to become {̄arlie or {̄ukk. It's a krap proposal. Dit{̄ it.

I read it twice. All I could think was: *Strange how he went on to use the {̄ in his rant. And, wow, his phone can do*

*strikethroughs of text. Charlie must be one of Ernie's pet agents, always getting the best gadgets first.*

When we carefully conjoin the official silent p rule with our two non-official spelling rules, our test-case sentence becomes: Psharlene, one kewl magikal lady with a new psmartphone from the {anging psity, psaw the fewlish pskewlboy eat a krimson toadstewl.

Another idea floated by one of our outstanding overseas agents was the reversal of f and ph. Thus, the new *fase* is *phantastic*. *Phiscal* and *fysical* health are of *phoremmost* importance. *Pheeble Foebe pheels phaint phrom flebitis*.

And, when we add this f/ph swap to our increasingly strange sentence, we get: Psharlene, one kewl magikal lady with a new psmartfone phrom the {anging psity, psaw the phewlish pskewlboy eat a krimson toadstewl.

Are we done yet? No whey! (Sorry, this is the cliché of a pun that keeps giving.) Plenty more milk of human kindness as well as from a cow's sorrow. Ok, setting aside the old rites for the newly installed rongs, [sic] yet another idea was offered by a female agent in Yorkshire – one who said that she always hated seeing words end in y, ever since elementary school.

She offered to all of us fine and refined agents an earnest invitation to change all words ending in the sometimes-vowel y to an ie ending; that is, well, the same sound. Hence, we see: *Yesterdaie, lovelie ladie Marie laie quietlie*.

And now, if you combine this latest proposed spelling rule with the previous ones, our quickly-fading-away-from-legible-English sentence becomes: Psharlene, one kewl magikal ladie with a new psmartfone phrom the {anging psitie, psaw the phewlish pskewlboy eat a krimson toadstewl.

But wait, there's more! (Read it in the tone of a late-night TV commercial barker.) Another clever female agent in Kansas wanted each and every lone indefinite article a to be spelled eigh. She stated that if this four-letter combination was good enough for a long a sound in eight, then it was definitely good enough for all indefinite a's in our typography.

And thus, our fabulously forlorn (Have I used that phrase somewhere? Must check valve later.) sentence is now: Psharlene, one kewl magikal ladie with eigh new psmartfone phrom the {anging psitie, psaw the phewlish pskewlboy eat eigh krimson toadstewl.

Fred then wanted a w placed in front of one and once for phonetic reasons. Done. Psharlene, wone kewl magikal ladie with eigh new psmartfone phrom the {anging psitie, psaw the phewlish pskewlboy eat eigh krimson toadstewl.

Penultimately [*sic*] (mercifully, we're almost done), a senior male agent demanded that j replace the letter g when the true sound was that of the letter j. He was tired of j being ripped off by g. It was *trajic* (or better, *trajik*) how long this error had gone on.

With this addition, our demonstrably demented sentence is now: Psharlene, wone kewl majikal ladie with eigh new



psmartfone phrom the {anging psitie, psaw the phewlish  
pskewlboy eat eigh krimson toadstewl.

Last, but by no means in the least, a younger female agent  
in Vietnam suggested that the word new be replaced with  
the animalistic homophone gnu. I asked her what led her to  
this particular word-switch idea and she texted back:

It has a silent g and all the cool kids text nu for new on their cell phones.

I'm a bit of an old, stuck-in-my-ruts, plodding goat now, and I  
can only guess what's hip these days in youth culture. Thus,  
I didn't veto her motion; I forwarded it to Ernie and the other  
agents. However, one of them torpedoed it. Not sure who it  
was. Maybe it was the extra-odd one who was roller-skating  
on thin ice.

Well, anyway, combining the one official cardinal spelling  
rule (The silent p in front of words beginning with the letter s.  
Remember that one? If you forget that one, I don't even  
know if a special variance could get you past the wrought  
iron E gates.) with the eight unofficial ones, our highly  
hypothetical sentence has finally become: Psharlene, wone  
kewl majikal ladie with eigh gnu psmartfone phrom the  
{anging psitie, psaw the phewlish pskewlboy eat eigh  
krimson toadstewl.

If you now have a headache, my sincerest apologies. If you  
just got dizzy and upchucked your lunch, send Ernie the bill.  
He's good for it. Maybe. Check's in the mail.

And, what did our electronic earwig ringleader think? Well,  
sans sugarcoating, Ernie was furious with this combination

of proposed rules, as he claimed to have spent thousands of dollars on merchandise with the **psecret psociety** logo on it. He mass-texted all of us, stating:

If we fange to psekret psocietie, we lose all kredibilitie!

The things that struck me about his text was that he spelled credibility with a k and ie, and that he had a strikethrough function on his text, too. Maybe Ernie had some Teutonic blood circulating through his barely functioning antennae.

Personally, I liked all of the submitted spelling suggestions. Hey, the more the merrier. The further out of bounds, the better. Just don't have conflicting rules. Strikethrough ~~that~~. Conflicting rules can fly, too. High.

Now, pass me that flask of whiskey. Or, is it whisky today?

Some bitter detractor said that we just want to look like some esoteric group (even though we're not – just in a knot) like the Illuminati, Free Masons, Ordo Templis Orientis, or something equally arcane.

Illuminati? We've already got cases of LED lamps for our dank dungeon. We're all good to go. Knowhere [*sic*] of/on course.

Ok, who stole my granules? That darn earwig gets into everything. If it isn't sealed tight, he's ravaging the contents. I'm truly amazed that his microchip hasn't shorted out yet. Modern wonders.

Now it's assignment time. Should you be really bored, or very curious, using the spelling rules discussed, convert the last paragraph (which is from a short story by yours truly) to psecret psociety spelling and post on the Facebook page.

And, before leaving, feel free to join in the meta-madness. We need people like you. To do ... something. What? We'll figure that out later. Well, you could propose another spelling rule. Oops, here comes the boss. Luck be good!

> Exercise 091515 [excerpted from *Airported To Knowhere*]  
I retreated back towards the airport's main concourse in a state of shock. I rounded the corner and I was back in the 21<sup>st</sup> century once again. It was the same September day in 2010, just two and a half minutes later. *What the hell was that back there? Is a portion of that corner a wormhole? Or, have I lost my mind? Did someone put something in my coffee at Starbucks this morning? Or, did I? No, I'm out of those 'granules de grandeur' now. Maybe a flashback? If so, I hope there are no more. Well, not for a while. I don't want to flip out on that long trans-Pacific flight.*

## **2. The Edwards Branch Tunnel Legend (March 2010)**

The Edwards Branch, a tributary of Briar Creek in east Charlotte, flows through a tunnel that is comprised of twin rectangular concrete culverts, which run underneath the Independence Expressway (US 74). This watery passageway is about a quarter of a mile in length. That's 1,320 feet, if my division holds true. This tunnel loses sunlight once sixty feet inside. So, let's see, that would be 1,200 feet of sloshing around in the dark.

Typically, the creek water is less than five inches deep. The main channel sinews through a series of alternating sand bars. In some mucky parts, it is almost like quicksand. Your boot goes in, you try to pull it out, and the deeper it goes in.

Oh, you cannot see through the tunnel from one portal to the other. It's not a straight line. In fact, when one peers into this fluvial passageway, there is no light at the other end, only an eerie darkness. Needless to say, no one should enter without a pair of waterproof flashlights and waterproof boots. Well, actually, no one should enter, period, as it would technically be trespassing. So, please don't attempt this! (The preceding was a mandatory statement from our perpetually worried legal department.)

Now for the legendary part of this tale (after all, it is in the title). Well, legend has it that back in 1976, a white guy with brown hair and a cinnamon-tinged handle-bar mustache stole some jewelry from the K-Mart on what was then East Independence Blvd. (As of March 13, 2010, the building that K-Mart occupied was still in existence, but boarded up, awaiting possible demolition.)

The quick-footed, slender robber ran out of the store, heading west towards the old Capri Theatre. He had about a 70-yard lead on the rotund, white, middle-age, just-ate-a-tray-of-yesterday-lasagna security officer. He was increasing his lead by a foot with every yard strided. And, at that rate, we could have a math problem here. But, relax; we don't.

But, but, but, before he got to the movie house, he disappeared from view of the store cop. Now, where in this odd lot did he go?

Well, at the western edge of the parking lot is a creek. Apparently, the thief ran down into the creek. Since the creek bed was about eight feet lower than the parking lot, the thief appeared to disappear from the security officer's perspective.

The thief then ran downstream in the creek until he saw the outflow portal of the Edwards Branch creek tunnel. This is where he entered the tunnel. He must have thought that he had it made at this point.

Mr. Robber then flipped on the flashlight that he had in his pocket and splashed his way through the tunnel. He had the flashlight in one hand and the bag of heisted jewelry in the other. He was sure that he had pulled off a grand and very clever escape.

However, at about the halfway mark into the tunnel, he heard sirens on both ends. Suddenly, his sense of elation sank to the dire realization that he may very well be caught at the tunnel's end. His spirit went from imminent victory to certain defeat.

Nevertheless, the thief stopped for a few seconds to consider his options. But, then he heard dogs. German shepherds were already on his trail. He knew that he would be nabbed at one end or the other. What to do, he quickly wondered.

He decided to hide most – but not all – of the jewelry inside the tunnel. His flashlight spied a nook in a connecting pipe. He stashed the gold rings and necklaces on a concrete ledge inside this pipe. Then he trudged slowly in a deflated manner towards the inflow portal, where he knew arrest was unavoidable.

However, at about 200 feet from the eastern portal, he noticed some daylight above. It was a vertical shaft to a storm drain. He abandoned his resignation to capture and scurried up the shaft, which conveniently had footholds mounted into the concrete.

Once near the top, he managed to dislodge the heavy iron storm drain grate, and slide it aside. Then he hopped out, looked around, and walked down the sidewalk towards the Eastway Drive overpass.

He now felt again like he was going to get away. His mind was soaring. Euphoria was cradling his cranium. The sidewalk cracks were like hash marks on an American football field, and with each one that he passed over, he felt closer to the goal line. Touchdown – or paydown [*sic*] – was in sight. In his head, he could hear his girlfriend yelling, cheering him on. He was going to get away after all.

What our jewelry thief didn't know was that a Charlotte cop had seen him as he emerged from the storm drain. The police officer slowly followed him in his blue-and-white Crown Victoria cruiser for ten seconds. Then he flipped on the siren and the lights.

The brazen bandit, suddenly startled, dashed to the left without looking. He was killed instantly by a speeding dump truck with bad brakes.

### 3. **Galax\_ Galaxy** (October 2012)

As we exited the Family Dollar store on West Jefferson Street, Agent 32 spotted him. He was there – shirtless – in a second-floor, curtain-less, half-open sash window. Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) watched him gyrating and waving his hands while on his cell phone. He was a well-bronzed lad, probably in his mid-20s.

“He looks like this town’s lead hipster,” Monique remarked.

“Yeah, he sure does,” I replied. “Maybe he will be the next Jack Kerouac, and we can say that we saw him here when he was ...”

“When he was a drug-addled specimen in a window,” Monique stated as she began to laugh.

“Well, who knows, 32? Let’s not prematurely discharge him.”

“Yeah, you’re right, 33. Who knows? Let’s not sell him short.”

“I love how you call me 33 when my digital audio recorder is on.”

“Your digital audio recorder is always on,” Agent 32 retorted.

We continued walking down the street, heading north towards Washington Street. It was a perfect fall Saturday evening, when one thinks back to previous October evenings. *I wonder if there’s any magic tonight in this little mountain town. What psychic goodies await? Anything? Any compounding waves?*



Off in the distance, around a corner, the faint screams and cheers from a Little League Baseball game on Calhoun Street could be heard through the autumn air as the sun began to set. My mind sailed away with the invigorating zephyr. *I wonder if he saw the excerpted copy of 'Gold, a summer story' [a novel by yours truly] that I slid under his apartment door earlier in the day, when Agent 32 was asleep. Was that what got him so agitated on the phone? Or, was he just mad at his girlfriend for running late and missing the big weed connection? I bet he's dating the minister's daughter. The bad boy de ville. [sic] Yep, he's Billy Bad-Azz.*

"What are you thinking about, Agent 33?"

"Oh, nothing much, Monique."

"Some things never change." Monique guffawed.

I joined in on the laughter. "It sure is a perfect fall night. I sure could go for some Asian food."

"Yey!" Monique exclaimed. "Me, too." As a Filipina, she loved her rice-based dishes.

"Hey, I know where a Chinese restaurant is. I saw it on the way in to town."

"Ok, lead the way, Parkaar." [my ailing alias]

"Nicely pronounced, 32. Just call me that in the restaurant. You know, just in case."

"Why, of course, 33. I've memorized Ernie's game plan."

"Oh?" I asked with a raised right eyebrow.

Monique smiled. “Epicably,” [*sic*] she then said.

“Epicably? Is that a real word, 32?”

“A sure-real word.”

We turned right onto West Center Street, went one block, and turned right on North Main Street. Soon we were under a sign that read: ||**Canton**||

We entered the antechamber, and waited to be seated. I cleared my throat, and a middle-aged Asian lady appeared in black-and-white attire. She said that we could sit anywhere.

We went to a booth near the salad bar and sat down opposite each other. A few minutes later, she returned to take our order. I told her that we would both like the dinner buffet. She motioned to the stack of plates and went back to the kitchen.

Agent 32 then jumped up and began to load her plate with steamed white rice and brown noodles. She was hungry; we hadn’t eaten since Charlotte. She was going to get her money’s worth of carbs.

After five minutes of nearly nonstop chowing down, I began the conversation as a fly alighted on the high ceiling.

“How long do you think this place has been here?”

“No idea, Parkaar, but the food is good. Yum-yum.”

An older Chinese man, perhaps the/an owner, overheard us, and told me that the restaurant was twenty years old. I

thanked him for the info. Then the fly flew away with the knowledge gained.

Right after that, a Chinese-American-appearing high-school girl walked in with her Caucasian American friends. Apparently, she was the owners' daughter. They made some small talk. Then the girl whispered something to her dad while shielding her mouth with her hand so that we couldn't lip-read what she said. *The winning lottery number?* Soon she and her teenage entourage departed.

After a round of desserts, we paid up and left. We walked north on Main Street. I glanced down East Grayson Street. *Rex Theatre. Hmm ... Rex means king in Latin. I wonder how it got that name. Rex de Grayson? Rex de Galax? Rexlax? [sic]*

Then Agent 32 suddenly spoke. "What are you thinking?"

"See that movie theater down there, the Rex Theatre?"

"Yes ..."

"Well, rex is Latin for king."

"Yeah, so what? You know, Rex is a common American male name. Remember Rex Chapman for the old [Charlotte] Hornets?"

"Yes, I do. And, well, that's really all I was thinking."

"I had to ask." She sighed and chuckled.

"And, now you know." I had a laugh.

Agent 32 gave me a wry grin and giggled a final time as I heard a motorized mechanism approaching. An old, nearly dead car limped down the street, lagging behind us. We turned around, and it was him – the young hipster who was in the window earlier.

He kept looking straight ahead with his blonde hair all a mess. Then he sped off from the immediate twilight towards the quickly descending drape of darkness. His old, green sedan disappeared around a corner. *What an improbable loon. Every small town has at least one.*

We continued walking, but not talking. We climbed West Washington Street up to Knights Inn. Our motel room was on the upper level. It had an awesome view of the Galax bowl. (Galax sits in a valley, surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains.)

When we arrived, we took it all in for a few minutes. *What a nice, quaint, peaceful little town in Appalachia.*

“An incredible Blue Ridge scene, isn’t it, Monique?”

“It most certainly is,” she replied as she peered out towards the Merlot-wine-red, zigzag-bumpy horizon line. “What’s that noise?!”

There was some commotion at a hotel room down from ours.

“Probably just some revelers, already loaded on booze, 32.”

We decided to duck inside our motel room for the night. The number on the door: 129. *His license plate ended with 129. Strange coincidence?*

I flipped the TV on and found a Major League Baseball playoff game in progress.

“Ah, the [San Francisco] Giants aren’t dead yet, Monique.”

“Ok, 33, you watch it. I’m going to sleep.” Monique rolled over, facing away from the TV’s beam of electromagnetic radiation.

I turned the volume way down and Monique quickly fell asleep with a pillow between her legs. The wound was still sore. She had been bit by a vicious dog on her right calf during the last mission: an east Charlotte zero-run. A complete non-leaguer.

Then someone passed by the front window of our room. I sensed that they were lingering. I brushed the curtain aside. It was him – Billy Bad-Azz – just sitting in his decrepit automobile, windows open, just smiling. *What the fawk! [sic]*

I went outside to confront him. I decided to ask him an open-ended question, just to gauge his mindset.

“How much do you know about the plot?” I asked him, trying to maintain a straight face.

He quickly dispensed a reply. “What plot? I don’t know about any plot. However, I do have an incredible device that will change your life ... forever. Literally and literarily.” *And littorally?* He coughed. “Want to see it?”

“Why, sure.”

Before retrieving it, he went on to tell me that this particular device could extract thought fragments. I was skeptical, very

skeptical. He said that the range was up to two miles (3.2 km), and that it was directional. He was eager to give me a demonstration.

He then disembarked from his semi-ancient (late '70s) Toyota Corolla and walked towards the white picket fence with a small, dark-brown case in hand. At the precipice of the upper parking lot, he took the device out of the case. He aimed his contraption, which looked like a phaser [*sic*] out of a '60s Star Trek episode, at the town of Galax below. He then handed me a set of headphones and gave me a nefarious, shark-like grin.

“Man, when you put these headphones on, your mind is gonna be a-blown, dude. Über-blown. Totally blown away.”

This wasted lad was a baked-like-a-cake, closing-in-on-some-perceived-nirvana, glidingly giddy Gilbert Giddy-up. [of Hardee's fast-food fame] *Maybe he's on pills. Which ones? Oh, let's just play along. Maybe something short-story-worthy will present itself. I seem to be out of ideas as of late.*

“Is that so?” I asked, as I wondered what in the world I was getting ready to experience.

“I guarantee it. Brace yourself for localized thoughticle [*sic*] overload.” *Thoughticle?*

I slid the headphones on. I started to hear little bursts of audio bleeps. At first they were entirely incomprehensible. Then he made an adjustment, a fine-tuning, I suppose. Discernible words were then heard in various male and female voices in whispery tones.

Well, without further ado, here's the exact transcript of the thoughts that I heard that fateful night in Galax:

*[crackling noises] ... only five years to go; yep, just sixty worthless months to cross off on the calendars; I won't be that old; I'll still have a reason to live ... her ass is so soft; can't wait to have some rough sex with her; it's going to be great; I can tell she's the type; I saw her ass-crack tattoo ... I bet Daryl has a big one; gosh, I hope so; a nice, big, rock-hard sausage dog ... tomorrow will be fun, maybe too much fun ... Mark always gets what he wants, every damn time ... I hate how she does that ... I know Eunice is jealous of me; she is always focused on me; she always has been, ever since 8<sup>th</sup> grade ... I've got to get him to pay me somehow; need to put the screws to him ... her husband is so clueless; he'll never know ... well, everyone steals a little from their employer ... I can't believe what Steve did last night, but then, maybe I can; he's so shady, so sneaky ... Ed will be hungover and completely worthless tomorrow morning; he drinks all the time now; he's a complete alcoholic, just like his dad ... I've got to escape from this nowhere town; nothing is going to happen for me here; maybe I should go in the service ... the wheel is bent again; just my luck ... the house is finally paid off; now we have some breathing room, but I'll bet she finds a way to spend it ... I just know that Earl has a meth[amphetamine] lab in that vacant house by the railroad tracks; why else is he over there half the day? ... she got the job at the bank; she'll probably try to steal money or fuck the manager, or maybe both; I know that girl, totally devious ... Johnny is back to messing with that little whore; I knew he would go back to her; what a total scumbag ... another goddam leak; the plumbing in this house sucks! ...*

*who could be calling at this hour? ... no, no, no; not another annoying-as-hell political robo-call! ... I've got to do something with my life, and soon ... we could go to Roanoke tomorrow; I'd really like that, but she probably doesn't want to go ... I'm so sick of her meddling sister ... my Facebook account has been hacked; Steve probably did it; I really hate that douchebag! ... I swear, it feels like my thoughts are being monitored. <click> [silence]*

I took the headphones off. *Unbelievable! What a piece of hardware. We'll be rich! Or, World War III will start by dawn.*

"This is one priceless piece of hardware you have here, man," I announced as I turned around. But, he was gone! I had become so engrossed in these captured random thoughts from the valley below that I had failed to hear him drive off. *Why did he leave something so valuable with me? Does he have more of them? Is this some kind of test run?*

I walked back inside our motel room with the thought-extracting device under my shirt. Agent 32 was still sound asleep. I thought about waking her, but then decided to show her this novel toy tomorrow morning. *Ah, just let the princess sleep.*

I looked at the device under the bathroom light. It seemed to be completely housed in plastic. It must have been glued together; I didn't see any screws. I turned it over. On the bottom it read:

**Galax\_ Galaxy thought interceptor. 2011 model. Only works in Galax, VA, USA. Never use while a microwave oven is in operation in the same room. Never point at**



**self. Not responsible for content received by this device.  
End of warnings and legal disclaimers. This lower area  
intentionally left blank. Do not fill in blank.**

I cautiously placed the thought-intercepting gun under the top of the mattress, beneath the pillow on my side, and crawled into bed beside Monique. *Hope it's safe to sleep with this thing under my head. Will it interfere with my shunt? Maybe sleep on the left side to be safe.*

Sleep came fast, but was unsettled. I awoke several times during the night, and then one more time at 6:06 AM to find Agent 32 making some instant coffee. She had her mug of water in the microwave. *She sure got up early. Maybe she wants to get an early start on today's hike.*

Then I quickly thought back to what it said on the bottom of the thought extractor – the microwave-oven-operating-in-the-same-room warning. And then I remembered where the device was, and felt the switch with my left hand. *Is this on or off? Not sure.*

I saw the numerical countdown on the microwave oven display at 1:29. Then there was a big, bright-green flash that lit up the whole room. Monique's face was pure shock.

And, just as I tried to say: "Stop the microwave, Monique!" all quickly faded to black ... and all was silent ... and without thought.

#### 4. SFO |\_| SOFA (November 2012)

I arrived at the SFO airport via BART train about an hour before Agent 32's flight from Manila would touch down. The sun was setting on a late August day, as fog billowed over Sweeney Ridge and funneled into the valleys above San Andreas Lake, just like dry ice vapors going down the side of a flask in a chemistry lab.

Feeling restless, I kept moving around in the airport, taking the AirTrain to all four terminals. I kept thinking about what she said as I paced about the concourses. *What kind of surprise did she have in store? Would it really be a game changer? A mind blower? A tickle-me-goo-goo?*

And then, peering around the food court, I wondered who knew I was here. With about 20 minutes left to kill, I ducked into a Peet's Coffee & Tea in the international terminal. I looked for something to read as I sipped the dark roast.

I spied an *SF Weekly* that someone had discarded. I grabbed it and thought back to when I lived on lower Hyde Street, some 20 years ago. I remembered calling the paper's office. I was going to place a singles ad. It was kind of common back then. The girl who answered the phone was new. She wasn't sure whom I should speak with. We made some small talk, and then joked about if either of us would remember the conversation twenty years later. *I did, but I somehow doubt she did. Ah, but who knows? Is she still alive? She is probably married to a millionaire techie now. Ah, how time ensnares everyone and everything.*

My mind drifted back inside that small studio apartment in the upper Tenderloin district. (This is where my novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco* begins.) I kept thinking about the surreal art I hid in the building before I left. *Was it still in the laundry room walls? Back behind that noisy commercial-size dryer? Oh, well, what does it matter now? Or, even then? Why did I do such frivolous things? And, still do them? Mad artist disease.*

Then I glanced at my cell phone. Ten minutes until Agent 32's plane would be rolling down the bay-bordered tarmac. *I hope there are no mechanical issues with her plane. No crash. Ughhh ... that would be too much to deal with.*

I took a seat on a green sofa. It may have been for customers only, but I was tired. No one asked me to move. Then it dawned on me: This would be a great place to hide a copy of *Galax\_ Galaxy*, the short story that I wrote a month or so ago. *Yeah, let's do this.*

I surreptitiously placed a copy between the padding and the base of the sofa. When I looked back up, an older Asian lady was wagging her finger. At first, I thought her ire was directed at me for my little literature-stuffing stunt. *Oh, crap. Here comes a lecture. Maybe she'll even alert security. Arrest this sofa-trash-inserting freak!*

However – to my great relief – she was actually scolding a teenage girl, perhaps her granddaughter, who happened to

be passing right behind me at that moment. They moved along. *Whew!*

I recomposed myself, and boldly exhibited what I felt to be a nondescript Silicon Valley businessman's face. I snapped the newspaper to ensure a crisp fold. It was way over-the-top, but hardly anyone even noticed. I then rubbed my eyes, and an announcement began over the public address system:

"Philippines Airlines flight 104 will be arriving at gate A-12 on time. Flight 104 arriving at gate A-12." *Five minutes!*

I gathered my things and scurried down the concourse. I was almost running. I wanted to make sure that I would have the sight line to see her first. I wanted to get the drop on Agent 32. But, as I hid behind a support column, I suddenly heard an unmistakable Filipina's voice behind me.

"You-hoo! Hello there, Agent 33. Are you holding up that post?"

"You sneaky little thing! How did you get back there without me so much as noticing?"

"Ha-ha-ha ... This girl has her ways."

"I see. Well, you can call me Parkaar – my most recent ailing alias. How shall I address you, Agent 32?"

“Call me Monique. Monique by the creek!” She burst into uproarious laughter.

“Monique, you freak! You read that short story?” *Where did she find it? Ah, the magic of the internet, I suppose.*

“Yep! Sure did.”

“That’s freaking amazing! The distribution was, shall we say, very limited.” I chuckled. “Know what I mean?”

“I do. Oh, yes, I do. I found a copy in the Pisgah National Forest, under a footbridge near the Mills River.” *How bizarre! When was she there? Who was she with? Anyone?*

“The South Fork?”

“Yes!” *Truly amazing. Never thought that anyone would ever find that one.*

“Ah, passerelle [footbridge in French] perfect!” *Passerelle?*  
“Well, how was the flight?”

“Long, so very long! The pinay [a Filipino lady] beside me wouldn’t stop talking. So concerned she was about her boyfriend. Always asking me for advice. She was an emotional mess, Parkaar.”

“I see. Sorry to hear that, Monique. Hey, are you hungry?”

“Yes, I actually am a little hungry despite eating twice on the plane during the 11-hour flight.” *Eleven hours in an aluminum can. God, there’s got to be a better way. [in a Roger Daltry tone] Jeez, my butt hurts just thinking about it.*

“There are a couple of Asian restaurants in the food court.”  
*Oh, good. Yum-yum!*

“Ok, let’s do it!” *Wow, there’s an opening.*

“Uh, can we wait until the hotel room?” *What a horn-dog.*

“Very sly, Parkaar. Don’t get ahead of the situation.” *Must calm down. Take deep breaths. She’s so damn sexy.*

“Well, Monique, you left that line hanging out over the plate as we say in America in the summer.” *Only in the summer?*

“Yeah, and you had your fork ready.” She guffawed freely.

We ambled over to Fung Lum. Monique was rolling her luggage behind her. I noticed that she wasn’t carrying a purse or handbag.

“Only one piece of luggage?” I asked.

“I travel light, Parkaar.”

And there we were at one of those small round airport dining tables. I gazed up at her brown pinay eyes, and could see all

the years she spent in Siquijor. I started the volley of word salad.

“Well now, I do believe you have something to tell me.”

“No news is good news. Am I right, Parkaar?”

“You’re right most of time. And, you would be correct again, but this time, Monique ...” I turned to look at what Agent 32 was suddenly looking at.

Off in the near-distance, an overweight, Caucasian, middle-age man sat on the green couch – the one where I left the copy of *Galax\_ Galaxy*. The sofa’s four-inch-high, front, right, pine peg leg broke, and the green couch lurched to the side. The man rolled onto the floor. Onlookers amassed. Some asked if he was hurt. But, he wasn’t. *That didn’t look good.*

The sudden motion of the sofa pads caused a corner of the short story copy to protrude. The large rotund man got to one knee and snatched it. He then stood up, steadied himself, grabbed his luggage and hobbled away, muttering something about suing the airport for a million dollars.

“What did he grab from under that sofa cushion, Parkaar? Was it the manufacturer’s warning label?” She giggled for a few seconds.

“You know, Monique, the trick is for something to stay hidden for just the right amount of time. Discovery needs to be delayed, but not eternally denied.”

“You’re going daft.” *She may be right.*

“Daft due to the evening draft.” *What nonsense he speaks.*

“Whatever, 33. You really want to know my secret, don’t you?”

“Well, I came this far. And I couldn’t imagine returning as the same person.” *What did I just say?*

“You never ever stop, do you, Parkaar?” Another chuckle.

“Well, when the shark stops moving, it dies.”

“Oh, and are you the shark?”

Before I could answer, Monique placed a small coin in my right hand. I covered it with my fingers.

“Is it safe to look at it here?” I asked.

“Let’s go in a family restroom.” *Wow!*

“What?!” *That sure was bold of her.*

“Just kidding. Gotcha.” *She sure did.* She started giggling like a schoolgirl. “Sure, you can look at it right here.”

I glanced into the palm of my hand. It was a gold-colored coin, about the size of a US quarter. A snow-capped



mountain image was on the obverse with the word *Teide* under it. On the back was a map of several islands with the words *Islas Canarias* and the number *2023*.

“Ah, a coin from the Canary Islands,” I proudly stated, remembering my *dos centavos del Español* (two cents of Spanish). “Did you visit there recently?”

“No, I’ve never been there. I found it in my luggage.”  
*Strange.*

“Why, that’s kind of odd. Really odd.”

“Yes, indeed! But look at the year.”

“Oh, yes, 2023! Obviously, a dye error.”

“Is this mis-mint [*sic*] valuable?” *Mis-mint? Never heard such coinage.*

“I’m not sure how much the coin is worth for having that future year stamped on it. But, it is no ordinary coin. That, I can assure you. I can tell you more about it over a drink.”  
*Hope that wasn’t too forward.*

“What did you have in mind?” *Ah, she’s game.*

“This airport has about everything now. How about that popular American cordial concoction, the mudslide?”

“I had one in the Cebu airport once. It was so sweet. You know, Parkaar, we pinays love sugary drinks. So, ok, sure.”

“Ok, I’ll be right back.” I left for the bar counter.

Monique noticed a pink, folded piece of paper on the vacant adjacent table. Curiosity got the best of her. She quickly reached over and grabbed it. There was a photo of a young lady inside. She appeared to be Southeast Asian. Underneath her image was a bold, one-line caption:

**Full-Body Asian Massage by Jen ... 405-619-194\_**

I returned with Monique’s brown mixed drink. I looked at the photo. “Who is that? Our next assignment?”

Monique laughed. “Very funny, Parkaar. I found it on that table. Now, why in the world would this masseuse purposely leave off the last digit of her phone number?”

“What? Let me see that.”

Monique then handed me the 3” x 5” black-and-white glossy photo. *Hmmm ... very strange.*

“Yes, that is very odd, indeed, Monique. Super-strange. We’re in psecret psociety territory now.”

“Ok, you’ve got your digital audio recorder on. I know it, 33.”

“Of course, 32.” I winked at her. “Monique, maybe it’s a test to see how bad one wants her massage services.”

“But, who is willing to call up to nine wrong numbers?”

“A lot of horny guys would after a few drinks.”

“Yuck! You men are such dogs.” She sneered.

“Wait. Are you sure that all but one are wrong numbers?”

“Well, I would think so, Parkaar.” *Sometimes he is so dense.*

“Monique, what if her enterprise is so big that she owns all of the phone numbers with all ten last digits?”

“Well, I guess that’s a possibility, 33. An outside possibility.”

“You know, the more I think about it, 32 ... well, it just seems like an artful prank.”

“Just a prank? Ok, I dare you to call just one number.”

I then dialed the nine listed digits and depressed a random final key with my eyes closed. *Oh, what am I doing?*

One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Just before terminating the call, I heard a female voice abruptly ask: “Have you got the coin?”

## 5. Plasma & Wigwood (December 2012)

She was a striking, smiling, stylish, 50-something Asian lady now, who suddenly said: “Hi there, sir. You sure do look familiar. Do I know you from somewhere? A rooftop, perhaps?”

But first, let’s go back a few days. Well, really, more like years. Decades, even. We can fit through this time portal, this narrow worm hole. Button those loose sleeves. Yep. Here we go. Watch that last step. It’s a woozy doozy.

<flash> Ah, here it is: Charlotte back in the early 1970s. The Plaza-Midwood area of the inner eastside was not the dichotic yupscale gentrification/neo-hipsterdom creation it is today. It was a much seedier, completely non-trendy, often dangerous scene all the way around.

Back then, drug addicts were selling their blood plasma for another fix. Alcoholics slept it off on the sidewalks, lying in their reeking urine. An X-rated theater featured skin flicks that would have you stuck to your seat. Literally. And no-nonsense working-class greasy-spoon restaurants, where even the salads were deep-fried, were the norm. Ok, a possible exaggeration there.

PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon) was drunk because it was American and dirt cheap – not because it was the hipster brew of choice. In fact, the current crop of trust-fund scenesters were not even born yet.

The pigeons were more numerous in those days. But, the exact reason why escapes me at the moment. Oh, wait a

sec; it was the bag ladies. I remember seeing them at Central & The Plaza, near the bus stop, tossing out pieces of stale bread. Yeah, that was it. Remember that? No? Looking elsewhere? It's ok; you're excused. Sorry about that senseless diversion.

Well, you get the picture. I'm putting this out as product. And parcel. Sometimes you have to type stuff like this to keep the story going. Or, to momentarily derail it while buying time. Ah, just a little icing on the red velvet cake, which we haven't even yet baked. But, I digress. Moving night along.

Ok, now there was this one really bad alcoholic pill-popper. He was a young white dude with light brown hair, of average build, who was a regular at the plasma donation center near Clement & Central. And, lo and behold, he got the nickname, Plasma. I kid you not.

Well, at first he really despised the moniker, but he grew into liking its fit. Sometimes after downing a six-pack before noon, he would scream, "Mr. Plasma is ready to collect!" That usually cleared the sidewalk.

Let me stop for a second and tell you that that last Diet Cherry Coke – the one that was on the office floor for seven months – well, some remnants were left on the inside of the plastic bottle after gulping it down – the same remnants which are probably on my insides now. Lovely, I know. And, hey, how about that – a sentence with a back-to-back *that*. Did you catch that? That is to be avoided, right? Write. And, yes, I do this without Adderall or sign-language sympathy. Ok, enough, enough, enough. Back to our waggish tale.

Perhaps you are now wondering: *Did Plasma have a job?* Why, of course not. *Where did he live?* Would you believe that he rented, via a stipend from good ol' dad, a back yard 8' x 10' metal shed with no heat source for \$20/month off Lamar Avenue? And, all through the winter, too, mind you.

Yes, he wrapped himself in five sleeping bags when it got down to 10°F. Mr. Plasma slept through the frigid nights donning a found-on-the-street Sugar Mountain ski mask.

He timed his bathroom breaks like a German train. The fast-food restaurant's sink made for a quick sponge bath at 9:30 AM (after the breakfast rush had passed).

And, how did he smell? Usually as ripe as a soft, decomposing, post-Halloween pumpkin.

I can hear one of you out there asking about his lineage – so very important in provincial '70s Charlotte, you know. Well, Plasma was the son of a downtown banker. Back then downtown was called, well, downtown – not uptown. Maybe some geologic uplift in the '80s? Who knows? That's another story almost altogether.

Yes, it was the oh-too-typical story of the only-son rich kid. Pop was always bailing him out of his screw-ups. A pair of downtown lawyers stayed very well-appointed just because of the plasmatic one's misadventures in the Queen City of the South. (Trivia note: This is also the motto of the city of Cebu in the Philippines.)

Money for the essentials was never a problem for Plasma. There was no real need for a job with his next-to-nil aspirational outlook. The blood-plasma money became extra

beer and pill money. It was all an endless party without an end in sight. Well, it was up until he embarrassed his dad at an important board meeting.

Somehow, our boy Plasma gained access to the 29<sup>th</sup> floor boardroom, staggered in, totally wasted, demanding money.

He was immediately cut off – financially and otherwise. He would never receive money from, or hear from, his dad again. His financial life-support line was severed in an instant. As for his mother, she died when he was three. Maybe I should have told you that earlier. Sorry. My bad. I'm not the greatest story teller. Please, bear with me. The finish line is nigh. It's a short story, after all.

I think that it was early in the summer of '75 when the 21-year-old, scraggly, frayed, ready-for-the-grave Plasma met up with 20-year-old Marvin Wood. Yeah, that sounds about right. A hot late June day in 1975. I think we're in the ballpark now. Popcorn! Hot pop porn! [*sic*]

Marvin, as fate often has it, was from the wrong side of the tracks: West Charlotte. Wilkinson Boulevard was his beat, and he beat it well. The oldest of five; he was lean, black as night, and wore a red cabbie cap. He knew how hard the street could be, and was as sly as a fox when it came to making a clever move in dire straits. When loot got razor-thin in the spring of '75, he headed eastward.

At first Marvin indulged in legitimate – though low pay – work as a bag boy at the original Harris-Teeter grocery store. Sometimes he received some tips, but it was pretty paltry overall. He was just eking out an existence.

Marvin rented a room in a flophouse on nearby Hawthorne Lane. He often wondered if he should have attended summer school at West Meck as he watched moths circle the unshielded overhead light bulb, night after night. He would have graduated two years ago.

Another hot, humid, hazy morning. It was just another boring day of bagging vittles on checkout line nine. A can of peas landed in the brown paper bag. Marvin could see his sad face in the reflection on the shiny silver can's top. He quickly put a loaf of bread over it. He thought: *This is nowhere. Must do something. Something else. Something not here.*

Ok, we have our two characters identified, Plasma and Marvin, though not so well developed. No argument there. But, they still have not met yet. Do you now, sage reader, feel a tension in your room/space/mind? Yes, I can feel it over here.

<snap> Something that was elastic ... is not anymore. Ok, enough noodling. (Mercifully, I'm not a self-indulgent lead guitarist).

When a loosely stitched button snapped off his yellow dress shirt, Marvin just sighed, "Just fucking [*sic*] great!" Then a soup can ripped through the brown paper bag. His grocery-store shift was spoiling fast. No, he was not a happy bagger.

Now, guess who was coming through Marvin's line with a 12-pack of RWB (Red, White & Blue) beer on an early, maximum A/C, July afternoon? Well, I won't introduce a third main character in such a short read. Well, not just yet. Yep, it was Plasma.



The two of them immediately struck up a rapport in fate-filled checkout line nine (lives). When Marvin told Plasma that his last name was Wood, an already inebriated Plasma shouted, "Wigwood!"

Moreover, they agreed to slug down some brew later that night on the roof of the Plaza Pussycat Theater across the street. They would discuss the next hustle, or so they said.

At 7:55 PM, Marvin and a hot 19-year-old Asian girl named Jade met Plasma behind the adult theater with a bottle of Scotch whiskey. Plasma had already begun drinking his 12-pack; only eight bottles remained in the cardboard box.

Plasma scurried up the ladder, beer box under right arm, in a matter of seconds, never missing a rung. He motioned for Marvin and Jade to come on up. Jade ascended first. They all safely landed on the X-rated movie theater's flat, tar-covered roof.

There were some low-profile lawn chairs up there. They sat down as twilight descended upon them. They could hear the sounds of the passing cars on Central Avenue, but they couldn't be seen due to the four-foot-high brick parapet.

The cheap Scotch got passed around, trailed by a green cigarette. Intoxication quickly set in.

Soon they were telling tales of life in Plaza-Midwood. Their laughing grew louder and longer. Marvin suddenly jumped up to make a grand announcement, perhaps to impress the ever-sexy Jade, who was studying both of them for any signs of sense.

However, Marvin's bare right arm brushed against the building's electrical service head. Some of the insulation on the hot wire was missing.

Result: Marvin was electrocuted in seconds. He had been standing in a pool of rainwater.

Plasma and Jade looked at each other in horror as Marvin's smoking body dropped off the live conductor. They freaked out. Jade hurried back down the ladder, never to be seen again.

Plasma thought about what to do for seventeen minutes, then got paranoid, and exited the scene, too, fearing that he would be charged with murder.

Marvin's body wasn't found for another twenty-six days. It made the local area papers and the TV news. The police classified it as suspicious, and never closed the case. Several decades went by, along with thousands of rain clouds, train whistles and horn beeps.

And then on a hotter-than-normal June day in 2012, Plasma was walking by Bich's Nail Salon, head-down, when he heard a familiar Asian female's voice.

## 6. **Availing Asheville** (January 2013)

The number on the Asheville hotel door was 415. It was my old area code from when I lived in San Francisco, California. As I stared at the plastic numerals, my mind went into rewind mode. *Man, oh man, that was a long-azz [sic] time ago. 1992. Two decades over the dam. Almost another lifetime ago. 737 Hyde Street. Apt. 405. Was that the number? Think so. And, I thought I was going to be the next Andy Warhol ... or something. Foolish delusions of art-world grandeur. Ha-ha. That sure didn't happen. Just ended up on the walls of a coffeehouse. What was the name of that joint? Oh yeah, it was called Café Soma. And, what was my phone number? Can't remember it now. [And, even if I did, would I want to have it printed here?] BART didn't go to SFO back then; had to jump on a MUNI bus or pay a hefty cab fare. Ok, back to Asheville. Let's focus on the here and now before we have an accident.*

We, Monique (an alias for Agent 32, my Filipina wife) and I (Agent 33) were staying at the Downtown Inn, a five-story older hotel undergoing some sprucing up. A local artist had painted a lurid mural on the wall around the ground-level swimming pool. This patio pool was closed now, as it was late December (of 2012) and a wee chilly. But, for some odd reason we would wander out there. Oh, yes, it was for the free continental breakfast. Not a bad spread. Bagels, flavored coffee, fresh fruit. It surprised me for a two-star (my best guess) hotel.

Ah, but back in the room, the sheets looked clean and the mattress was bedbug-free. And the view – now isn't that why you go to the mountains? – was majestic. We would later watch snow squalls scrape the southern flank of Beaucatcher Mountain. Simply sublime stuff.

It was one of those exterior-entrance, corridor-out-in-the-weather hotels. Motel style. *What differentiates a hotel from a motel? John said that exterior doors = motel; interior corridor doors = hotel. But, I always thought that motels were only one or two stories; three levels and above = hotel. Hotel, motel, no-tell, show-and-tell ... and the big oak tree fell. Oh, well.*

Well, this is where we were, Agents 32 and 33 of the highly esteemed <cough> psecret psociety (a group on Facebook). Agent 32 was calling me Parkaar (my ailing alias) for sport, and for the digital audio recorder.

Monique was heard to say: "Parkaar, go do some parkour in the park." [Pritchard Park, that triangle in the middle of downtown Asheville, where the homeless congregate and break bread and break and make bad, sometimes. I usually stayed clear of it. The aggressive panhandling turns me off and seals my wallet shut.] *C'mon, do a trick, dude. Make yourself disappear. Ok, that was harsh. Just do something creative. Use your bean. Let it ferment. Don't be another obnoxious oxy-drunk with an out-of-tune acoustic guitar trying to be the next Bob Dylan. Listen, you sing worse than me ... and that's saying something ... terrible!*

Yes, I failed my 9<sup>th</sup> grade final chorus audition. In fact, my choral teacher said: “Let’s just stick with the academic grade.”

Yep, I still remember that humiliating line. The class laughed. Had to smile. It was that bad. So, I know bad singing firsthand. I can detect it, like really quick ... as in five notes or less. Thus, we stayed clear of the terrible triangle.

Of and on course, we ate at Laughing Seed on trendy Wall Street. Good veggie fare. A wee pricy, though. The waitress wasn’t too kewler-than-thou. [*sic*] You know, some call it the Asheville attitude, rather than the Asheville altitude. Hey, just relaying what I hear in C-towne (Charlotte). *Hope they can’t read my thoughts in here.*

So, anyway, we stayed at the Downtown Inn in room 415 for two nights. Shot some pics that we used in a 70-second artsy video-short (The Asheville Cycle). I think it’s up to 9 views on Youtube. Maybe 12 by now. Not exactly going viral. Oh, well ... that’s fine. Psi’s Gangnum record is safe.

In the elevator on the second night, we met a vagabondish dude. He said that he and his buddy drove up to Asheville on the spur of the moment ... from Mobile! Yes, from Mobile, Alabama. That’s like a 9-hour drive! Gosh, and I thought the two and a half hour drive from Charlotte to Asheville was long. (I hate driving for more than two hours and two minutes.)

We saw the famous Biltmore House on day one, as Monique had never been there before. We left clues in the salons. We rode bikes on the estate grounds. It was a little 4-mile loop. Very easy, mostly along the French Broad River. Then we did the wine-tasting thing. Bought a three-bottle box-pack.

The wine is actually not that bad. We especially loved the Century white. Good stuff. Goes down easy. Nice flourishes of Pisgah piquancies [*sic*] with a florid finish fit for framing. Oh, those wine descriptions. Walking (and wanking) in adjectival wonderlands. *A fennel-maple aftertaste is regally relinquished.*

Any of ways, we took a city bus – an ART bus, mind you – to W AVL (West Asheville) on day two. Scored some deals at the Goodwill store. It was a cold rainy day. One where you just wished it would snow. Well, maybe after we were off the asphalt, safely back in our hotel room. In which case, it did ... a little. Some light flurries. But then, there would be these bursts, momentous passing snow squalls.

There were times when I thought back to when I lived off Charlotte Street. No, not the ritzy north end, but the south end. Had a view of City Hall off the front porch and a view of Mt. Pisgah out the back deck. But, I was with the wrong woman then (the first wife) and it all collapsed. Like a house of ice shards.

But, Monique is here now, and things are going swimmingly ... even if it is a bit cold outside. However, the heat in the room was strong; it heated the room up pronto. There was a

slight grinding sound, though. The fan motor may have had an oval bearing. But, other than that, a good deal. No real complaints.

We walked the streets of downtown Asheville on night two. Even in foul weather, many curious folks stirring about. We were distributing copies of previous works like this (like what you're reading right now). The format: little colored quasi-literary bifold booklets. Bifocals not included. Have to keep the print small and compact. No time for paragraph breaks or quotation marks. It made it appear like a puzzle at times. But, you've made it this far (in this more normal alignment). We're almost to the back page now where things get re-inchoated. [*sic*] *Now, there's a neologism.*

We carefully descended the wet brick steps to this basement bar. I think it was on College Street. The name escapes me at the moment. In.Sip.Id Lounge. Yeah, that was it. Divided into syllables. Way too clever to be bland. Well, we open the door and there are about a dozen hipsters just lounging around. Kewl [*sic*] ambient trance music in the background. But when we get closer, we hear, over and over: "*Somewhere ... it is all here ... somewhere ... did you hear? ... Somewhere ... it is all here ... somewhere ...*"

I felt a bit awkward, and I could tell that Monique was feeling uneasy, too. I thought, maybe just order a drink to get in the groove. I did.

The blue elixir relaxed us in no time. Very soon we were all a-buzz with the sights and sounds of this modern speak-easy kind of joint.

Then, yes then, it got strange. Our thoughts were being projected onto the walls with sound. Holy cow! What a multimedia show! I could see Monique's thoughts, and I knew it was time to go back to the hotel room. With dueling smiles, we got up to leave.

The beret-donning hipster-owner asked if we enjoyed our time. I told him that we did indeed, but we had to go now. He seemed kind enough, and his smile slid onto the wall as we turned to leave. *Wipe that smirk off your brick face, lad!*

Once out on College Street, I wasn't sure how long we had been in Asheville, or even how long we had been in that subterranean bar. A pleasant disorientation, it was. I was lucid of my impairment, yet I often thought: *Somewhere, it's all there, though not where all the sums are.* Yeah, some kind of nonsense like that. It was the line in my head that night, all night. It was in repeat mode. The phrase that pays on a rainy day.

Anyway, we marched ourselves back to the Downtown Inn without incident. When we arrived at the door to room 415, we saw a note on the door that read:

*Must have just missed you. Enjoy the town. -Ed*



Monique snatched the taped-on note off the door and asked me who the hell Ed was. I told her that I wasn't sure, but that it may be an editor who I fired about eight years ago. Of course, she then asked how he would know that we were in Asheville – at this very hotel room, no less.

I started thinking about the woman at desk, the one who was working when we left. She looked familiar. I relayed this to Monique.

She then demanded that we take the note down to hotel management. She was scared. Her sudden facial expression: seriously spooked.

I told her that Ed could be a real joker, and that, even if it was the Ed that I had to dismiss some time ago, he would not do us any harm. He wasn't that type of guy.

As we walked to elevator on our way to the front desk, we passed in the 4<sup>th</sup> floor enclosure, none other than this note-posting Ed. My head was kind of down as we crossed paths. Thus, when I heard him say, "Give me an honorable mention," I had no time to reply.

He was quickly around the corner and gone. Yes, just like that. Monique gave me a shocked expression. She thought that I had set the whole thing up in order to create another short story.

I told her that I didn't. Over and over, I repeated it. But, I wasn't sure if she ever believed me.

Well, Monique didn't sleep so well on night 2. However, nothing further happened of note, save a bump on the wall at 4:15 AM.

We drove back to Charlotte at 10 AM the next morning. I got a call from a blocked number as we curved around Lake Lure.

<click>

## 7. **Agent 107: A Final Report** (February 2013)

Agent 107, who went under the alias of Frank von Peck (also Frank N. Peck), escaped from the clutches of this mortal realm on January 6, 2013. He was aged 47 sun orbits. Please allow me some words of obituarial hagiography. A big 'Thank You' in advance.

Mr. Peck always wanted the most physically and psychically daring assignments. Throw in some feminine intrigue, and he was there, first in line, looking fine, and now where do I sign?

High adventure was his forte. And, he cleaned it off his plate in short order with an artful swoop. Always prepared, heck, always prepping for the next great adventure, often on a motorized two-wheeler.

He could keep things under his vest, unlike yours truly. Thus, the ringleader, Ernie Earwig, allowed him to join psecret psociety under the radar without being on Facebook. (The only variance ever granted, I do believe.) When asked, he would deny being an agent. He was that secretive. And, smartly so.

In the early years ('79 - '82), he roamed around east Charlotte in a self-customized brown 1975 Comet that had about 20 plastic green army men glued to the hood. It was a hit at stoplights on Albemarle Road. He later turned the wiper's nozzles outward and put red dye in the wiper washer

fluid's reservoir. You can imagine what he then did when in the center lane.

But, these were just a couple of the teenage pranks that would presage other matters of real heft and import down the road. And, his road had plenty of jumps on it. Ups and downs. Many miraculous recoveries and ingenious evasions.

His off-road phase on the old mining and logging roads of southern West Virginia were where he left us some clues on how to ride in high style. How to nimbly cross a swollen creek without becoming a nimrod. How to get the adrenaline flowing without blowing a gasket. How to beat that train through the tunnel ... or over that narrow trestle!

All of the thousands of miles of his travels. The tales from the trails. Well, it's still back there ... invisibly somewhere. Like your life, too, the past, the memories ... a story now in the clouds, passing by ... forever it would seem. *Yeah, let's get lost and float away!*

And, our Frank could read the clouds. He said that you could see the history of the world in them. One day you might see the history of the Roman Empire pass by. Such graphic scenes.

And graveyards. Wow! He could tell which of the deceased were at peace, and which were tormented restive spirits. He really didn't want me to document any of this. Whatever you do, don't retell any of this. He said that to me. Many times.

But, I think he would be ok with it now in his tranquil inurnment.

There was a time in a van – maybe it was mine or my brother’s – when he told us about things that were happening, and getting ready to happen, several miles away from where we were parked. Astounding prescience. Always a step ahead.

And then, a night in some frozen red-clay ditch. Oh, yeah, we had run off the road somehow. An unknown person in a nondescript car drives by.

“We’ve got to get out of here now!” I yelled on that cold January night in eastern Mecklenburg County.

“Why?” Frank asked rhetorically. “That wasn’t a cop.”

“Are you sure, man?” I asked with some trepidation.

“I’m always sure, dude,” Frank announced most assuredly.

I then rocked the van back and forth, shifting the transmission lever from D to R and back again. Suddenly, the van’s rear wheels grabbed the pavement and we were free from the mud trap. Freed from a low spot, physically and psychologically. Another sigh of relief.

But, that damn car made a U-turn. He or she followed us. *Crap! Futher-mucker! [sic] This aint gonna end good.*

Frank barked out the driving orders. "Don't look back; don't turn your head around; just look straight ahead."

I did as he advised. The trailing car turned left onto a side road and disappeared.

"Ah, they missed their turn, that's all," I said. "Whew!"

"Where are they going?" Frank asked with a curious look.

"Home, I suppose."

"That wasn't a driveway."

I thought about that for a second. He was right. It just led to a party spot in a clearing (an illegal dumping area).

"Well, let's not follow them."

"You know, we were all doing this under different faces and names centuries ago. The appearances change, but it all gets recycled. Over and over." Frank wasn't joking.

"You're sure about that, sport?"

"Yes, in so many words. In so many worlds."

"You're a real sayer [*sic*] of sooths, Frank."

"Would you rather I be a slayer of sleuths?"

Sometimes, I would just say something like ... “Well, you know ...” and he would quickly pounce and close the open sentence.

“Well, you know ...”

“The wheel is worn and you need a new face.”

“Very funny, Frank. Very, very fawking [*sic*] funny.”

He liked to keep things in order to be free to move ... chaotically, yet on target, it often seemed. Mega-mobility. Always moving towards the next great event with the previous one in tow. *Tethered to a loose-fitting mind, who knows what one may find?*

He made us think about life on Earth in this human form. What is the real goal? Are you happy now? Will you really be happy there and then? When you get to the next level of this or that will you just crave the one above? Does it ever end? Destinationitis, [*sic*] I think he called it. The curse of this modern age.

And, he told me in so many non-words not to fall into this trap. Live today. Live in the now. Live while reading this. You don't have to be a hedonist. Just stop the constant discounting of the present.

Well, no, he did not directly say these things, but they were certainly implied. These nonliterary notes help me. They were all over his desk. These tokens of those times.

Ah, I knew he liked the new girl. That shark grin. I saw it first in Florida. Clearwater. Epik [sic] with a k. No problem with the ladies. I took mental notes, but could never match his sly, understated technique.

I wanted to go to Amsterdam with him, but our schedules never would allow it. I wanted to see him smoking weed freely and openly in a Dutch coffeehouse (as opposed to behind a dumpster in Monroe, NC). Oh, well. Maybe when I go back to the 'dam, I'll leave copies of this obtuse obit (this meandering thing you are reading now) here and there along the canals. Perhaps a stoned ex-pat will recognize a reference point.

Yeah, we used to kick back on the Kuck back road and burn a phattie [sic] and listen to some Frank Zappa. A real über-duper in Mint Hill. The Independence High School daze.

Then add some Marezine mind motion madness in east Charlotte. Dropping miscellaneous items in the old Regency Theater on Albemarle Road. (Oh, they razed it some time back.) His pocket watch, it stopped at the same time the movie ended. Well, he claimed such. It was *An American Werewolf in London*. I wasn't there for that one, but I got several congruent reports.

Oh, we were at Morrow Mountain once. Well, actually numerous times. But, the most momentous occasion was, uh, I think it was on March 9, 1983. [This day would later be



the basis of the novella *To Morrow Tomorrow*.] A Wednesday. It was a nice spring-like day with a cool start.

There's a little creek next to the Kron House parking lot. We were hopping from boulder to stone up the creek. Somehow we never lost our footing, and never hit a wobbly rock. We were having a conversation as we sauntered along. It was like a fluvial philosophy lesson. The situation was fabulously fluid. *Did I really type that? Such idiocy.*

First it came downstream. It, the big thought flotilla, started flowing all about. But then, we hit a Y ... and it was like a recursive trap. You can read this either way. In the leaves. Or, on the stones. Even when the creek turned to clear Jello, we just kept moving. Advancing the plot. Picking at the ploy. Well, you get the jist: We was a-baked like Bundt marble cakes.

By some magi-chance, [*sic*] we arrived at a green lagoon. THE Green Lagoon! Not really a lagoon, though; just a small pond in the middle of the woods. It had a short pier going to the overflow drain. Frank stomped on it really hard. You could hear the innards of the Earth reverberating up through that overflow pipe. I can hear it now. We peered down the hole. We saw ourselves with hawks flying overhead. Circling. *Life is a fight for survival every second for most creatures.* We thought this in so many ways. For so many minutes. For so many millennia it seemed.

All earthly animals considered, we were glad to be human on that day. We went back to his red F-100 pickup truck. We

were thirsty. He had a 2-liter bottle of Shasta strawberry soda. The shadows were magical. In fact and/or knotted fiction (he claimed that fiction if unraveled properly reveals fact), we went on to call it 'The Magical.' It was mesmerizing to look at those shadows on the hood of his truck.

I really thought that he would be around for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that psyche-venture. I feel robbed somehow. He got my goat, put it on a boat, and set it afloat in a fathomless moat. Now, where's my coat?

Over Narrows dam, the story went wide. Way wide of the mark. How can we go back to these places without the present-day annoyances? Man, I want to dive into that cosmic stream. And drown.

Well, Mr. Peck beat me to it. I wasn't going to win that race. That trace ... lingers.

Now, I just wait for a signal. Maybe a whisper in the late afternoon wind. Or, just maybe something that he wrote, though he didn't write so much. Not much of a scribe.

I forced myself to go back to Morrow Mountain to check for a memento that he may have left behind. I walked to the Kron House graveyard (in the woods behind the old 19<sup>th</sup> century house). I looked at the family headstones. *Sentries for centuries*. It was the thought that came into my mind. I spotted a curious slab of marble. I turned it over; it read:

**I got a walk that can't stand still.** – Frank von Peck

It appeared to have been scratched with a penknife. I remembered it. I stood there for a while. Then I sat down. And, the gray clouds were hanging anxiously, beginning to chide me.

Then there was a gust of wind that rustled some fallen leaves. One stuck to the stone. When I removed it, there was no writing/etching on it. Gone. It is all here ... somewhere ... did you hear? ... somewhere ... it is all here ... [the audio track kept looping]

Ok, back to the green 'lagoon' before I close this mind tap off. It seems that they emptied it a decade ago. Gone a muck, gone amok. And, yes, the mystery escaped back into the boggy earth. Or, did it evaporate into the clouds? Probably the latter, and bring your tallest ladder.

Oh, but it's been refilled now. Plenty of new water for new thoughts. Plenty of pensive ponding to be had. It's worth the trek on a gray day. Take a new path. And please don't litter (one of Frank's pet peeves).

And, there was that day, floating in the clouds, reflecting on Lake Tillery. And, well, maybe it's still there ... somewhere. But, really, it all feels so postmortem now. The game has already been played. The adventures have been done. The highs have been reached. And, Frank had no plans for sitting on a rocking chair in his 70s – or even in his 60s – on some plateau chirping out platitudes. Or, did he?

Hmmmm ... I guess that I could have seen him in his early 50s still exhaling a cloud of smoke. "Dude, hit this quick!" But, no, I guess not.

Well, the well was deep. We fell into it. Down we went into that hidden rabbit hole. So much adventure. Gosh, we had more fun than could've been imagined. How did we get away with all of that? Who do we owe?

I have often wondered if Frank had some sixth sense of impending danger. He was just about always eluding the buzz-killers. Often high, but always keen. Never sloppy or lazy.

And, lastly, boy did he have a good mechanical feel. He could always get the down vehicle or vessel up and running when things looked mighty grim. The setting sun never panicked him. "Pass me that wrench, man. No, the other one, sportbreath." And, very soon we were in motion again as darkness gave chase.

Just then, when I looked down, a sense of 'goneness'. But the processes go on. No one person's death stops the sun from coming up in the east. Yet, the sunset seemed to be STOP sign red on this chilly February evening. And the wind ... man, I tell you it was whispering non-random syllables. And that shooting star ... meteoric, dude! 107 light-years out.

We're Peckless now. He was peerless. I'm not tearless.

## 8. Disconnected in DC (April 2013)

Agent 32 (code name: Monique) and I, Agent 33 (code name: Parkaar), were then summoned to Washington, DC. Not a subpoena, mind you, but we had to go. No three ways around it.

We traveled under the radar from uptown Charlotte, arriving at Union Station via a double-decker Megabus. We transferred to the Metro Red Line, got off at Silver Spring (Maryland), and walked about a kilometer to a one-point-five-star hotel on 13<sup>th</sup> Street.

As we walked to the hotel office, we observed the police raiding a hotel room. I thought: *Ah, our kind of place. Surely a short story lies in wait here.*

We threw our luggage down in the room and took a short nap. Mine was dreamless. As for Monique's, well, not sure.

Twenty-seven minutes later, we hiked over to Lotus Café for some Asian chow. It was tasty and satiated our long-travel-induced hunger. The waiter seemed to be up to something, but we didn't ask any questions.

The first night was initially uneventful. No notes were found in the hotel room. The only weird thing was that the tub faucet was fully open at 1:11 AM. Hot water was roaring out of the spout. Steam filled the bathroom.

At first I feared a major plumbing problem. But, upon twisting the (H) valve handle, the water completely stopped – not even a drip. *Now, how did that just happen?*

Monique then woke up. “How do you think that valve opened, Parkaar?”

“Maybe the maid is deaf and doesn’t realize that the hot water valve is faulty and prone to opening from slight vibrations, Agent 32.” *He must have that darn audio recorder running.*

“I’m not buying that explanation, 33. I sincerely doubt that vibration theory, Parkaar.”

“I don’t know, Monique, that little refrigerator’s compressor has a bit of a kick when it shuts off.”

Monique just rolled her eyes and pulled the covers back up. “Yeah, whatever, 33. Just get back in this bed before you get hurt.” *Get hurt? By what?*

Sleep was uninterrupted until 5:05 AM. That’s when I heard a couple arguing outside our door (# 435). I couldn’t make out the language – maybe it was Hungarian? Well, maybe. Anyway, the volume subsided after a thud on our door.

Monique was startled. “Did you hear that?!”

“Yes, I did.”

We just looked at each other, not sure of the best move (or non-move). A few minutes went by with no sounds – nothing audible. Apparently, the ruckus had passed. *Maybe just a domestic squabble.*

We drifted into a half-sleep for 50 minutes. Then we got up and made some coffee. We decided to get ready to go to the embassy.

We were out the door at 8:00 AM on the dot, and on the Metro by 8:15. The ride was morning-commuter uneventful. Newspapers being read. Coffee being sipped. Distant gazes reflecting off the windows.

We got off the Red Line at the Dupont Circle stop and looked for the exit.

“Wow, Agent 33, this has got to be the steepest and longest escalator in the world!” *Maybe in the Top 10?*

After Monique exclaimed that, I noticed that it was indeed quite a long and steep escalator. It reminded me of one at a BART station in the San Francisco Bay area, but I forgot which one.

We then began walking around the circle and soon found Massachusetts Avenue. We turned to the east and marched right past the Embassy of the Philippines (consular affairs). Silly us, we weren't even looking up.

We went past Scott Circle. That's when we stopped and I realized our oversight. We marched back.

Well, soon I was reaching for a doorknob on a nondescript white building. I turned the brass orb, the door opened, and I was met by the gazes of about two dozen Filipino Americans.

Monique took care of her passport business. Forty-four minutes later, we were outside the embassy. *That wasn't too bad. Nice friendly staff.*

A young Filipina was standing on the sidewalk in front of the embassy with an automaton. She asked us what our plans were for the day. We told her, Krystal, that we would just be doing the usual tourist thing: taking pics down at the National Mall. She asked if she and her mechanized pal could tag along, and we consented. *A Filipina with an automaton. I've got to write this up later.*

We strolled down 17<sup>th</sup> Street to the Washington Monument and took some photos. Then we proceeded towards the Capitol. And, finally we were in front of the White House.

"Are you hungry?" Monique suddenly asked.

"Yes, I am," I said.

"How about you, Krystal?" Monique asked while looking at her red automaton. *What a strange thing. So creepy! Why does she tote that around? I'm sure Parkaar likes it.*



“Yes,” Krystal said. “I could eat a horse!” She giggled.

We began walking back through the Foggy Bottom area, looking for a restaurant with rice. When we got to M Street, we turned west. We literally stumbled upon a step-down joint called Sala Thai.

We were promptly seated. I ordered while the ladies chatted at the large, thick, wooden, ten-seater, communal-style table. Soon the food arrived, and we were chomping away. *This is some good grub. If I lived in DC, I'd be here semiweekly. / I love the taste! / They made a good choice.*

More customers entered. It was obviously a popular Asian eatery. However, seating was limited. It got crowded fast. People kept brushing our backs.

Soon a pair of 50-ish Caucasian gentlemen sat across from each other, right next to us at the long common table. They began an intriguing conversation at a volume that was intended to be overheard. The bearded guy opened the volley with a comment about some spy book.

“Mazorgski wrote about that affair, Ed. The first 100 pages were riveting. I couldn't put it down. But, then it got really wonkish. Very inside game.”

“Blightener is an easy read, but you can tell that he never worked for NSA or the CIA.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty obvious that he’s guessing in spots.”

“You think that Kerry can man up to China, Steve?”

“Well, Ed, Chinese guns were fired at him in ‘nam. He won’t be forgetting that.”

“I don’t know, Steve, he seems like an egghead pussy. These guys are playing way more ruthless than he realizes.”

“Well, I guess we shall see.”

“Ah, our food is here, Steve-O.” *Steve-O?*

Their heads turned downward, as they began to feast on their rice-and-curry dishes. After an initial round of devouring, they came up for air and rejoined their conversation.

“Blightener said that he sometimes leaves first-draft pages of the novel that he is currently working on in random places, Steve. Hotel rooms, coffee shops, even inside newspapers.”

“That’s crazy as hell, but novel, and sounds just like him, Ed.”

“He said that he got the idea when he found a short story on a folded pamphlet on a couch in the San Francisco airport.”

“Man, that is seriously whacked. Off-the-charts whacked.”

Monique then notices that the bearded guy's (Steve's) knapsack is unzipped. She very discreetly slips a copy of *SFO |\_| SOFA* (a recent short story) inside. She looks at me and Krystal. I nod.

Three minutes later, we are all finished eating. We get up to leave. The two intriguing conversationalists seem oblivious to our exit.

Once outside on the sidewalk, I looked at Monique. "What exactly did you put in that man's knapsack?"

"One of the short stories – the San Francisco airport one."  
[SFO |\_| SOFA is the actual title]

"Oh, wow! He's gonna flip when he sees that in there. Excellent move, 32. Ernie will probably give you a bonus for that one." *Yeah, right? Check's forever in the mail.*

"I wonder if he will look up psecret psociety on Facebook and send us a friend request," Monique said.

"Yeah, I wonder," I replied.

"Maybe he'll think it is just too weird. I mean, what are the chances of some obscure, single-sheet-of-paper, short story ending up in your luggage?" Agent 32 asked.

"Next to nil," I answered.

"Heck, I just hope he doesn't spy on us." Monique stated.

“Spy on us?” I asked with a surprised look.

“Did you hear their conversation? They themselves seem like spies. After all, we are in Washington, 33.”

Krystal, who had been intently listening to our rambling discussion as we ambled up Connecticut Avenue, finally had a question. “Do you think they left the water on?” *What water? / How much does she know?*

I started to chuckle to play it off. Soon it was uproarious nervous laughter from all three of us. *Yeah, this is definitely worth a write-up.*

And, as the laughter subsided, we were back at Dupont Circle, searching for the Metro entrance.

“There it is, over there!” Krystal shouted as she led us over to the long and steep escalator. *Funny, for a Filipina just up from Florida, she knows Washington pretty good.*

We all hopped aboard for the mile-long descent. Ok, a slight exaggeration there. It is quite an escalator, though. Check it out if/when in DC.

When we were about two-thirds of the way down, I noticed an orange sheet of paper on the flat metal section between the down and up escalators. It was quietly resting on the snow trap.

As we went by, I snatched it. It was a half-sheet flyer for some pizza restaurant. Monique saw me grab it.

“Why did you grab that piece of paper, 33? Do you want pizza tonight?”

“Well, to be honest, I thought it was something else; I thought it was *Galax\_ Galaxy*.” [another short story like this one that was printed on orange paper]

“You’ve lost your mind, Parkaar!”

I just shook my head and grinned.

Somehow we never lost our footing. Never hit a wobbly tread.

Krystal then asked to see a copy. Monique handed her one from her backpack.

“Is this like the other one?” Krystal asked.

“Kinda,” I said. “They’re all similarly dissimilar.” *Huh?*

“What?” Krystal asked, looking bewildered. *He’s nuts!*

Monique then chimed in to ease the confusion written all over Krystal’s face. “Yeah, they are all just harmless, though somewhat enigmatic, little short stories that lead to nowhere.” [*sic*]

“Nowhere?” Krystal asked, still looking puzzled.

“Depends on how you spell it, Krystal,” I said. “It’s usually best to lead that place off with a silent k.” *Silent k?*

“I’m totally confused,” Krystal confessed.

“The usual state of affairs around here,” Monique then said.

“Welcome aboard, Krystal,” I said while noticing a jogger in soccer-length purple socks.

“Who pays you guys?” Krystal then asked.

“Pay?” Monique rhetorically asked. “You’re picking at the plot, Krystal.”

“I’m sorry, Krystal, we just can’t answer such questions,” I said. “Well, not at this time and place.”

Soon the three of us were on the train. There was an awkward silence. After four minutes, I broke it.

“What’s your stop, Krystal?”

“Gallery Place,” she shyly announced.

“If the station were named Gallery Park, I think Parkaar would reach ecstastasis,” [*sic*] Monique then added. “Sometimes he just walks around saying ‘I don’t know what

to say, and I say it all day ... in Gallery Park'. Yes, I know; it's all very crazy."

Krystal just sighed. "Oh?" Total bemusement had set in. Her train stop couldn't come soon enough. *What a demented duo these two are.*

When the train arrived at Gallery Place, we said our rudimentary farewells. Krystal quickly disappeared down the platform. She turned, and was gone.

"Well, do you think she's got ps-ps [psecret psociety] game, Parkaar?"

"50-50, Monique. Too soon to tell how she will tilt."

As the train rolled into Fort Totten, I found myself looking down at the platform. When the train stopped, I looked at the nearest bench. There was a red piece of paper on it, perhaps the size of a half-sheet (8.5" x 5.5"). *Why do I keep seeing this particular paper size? Probably because that's my printed short story format.*

Then the train screeched into Silver Spring. The sun was bright, but not very warm. We walked past NOAA, down East-West Highway, turned on Newell, and then on Kennett.

When we turned onto 13<sup>th</sup> Street, we saw a lurid mural on the building across the street. *Frank (deceased Agent 107) would have liked to add something trenchant to that.*

And when we arrived at our green hotel door, we saw a red copy of *Agent 107: A Final Report* [the prior short story] thumbtacked below the numerals. *Krystal's work? / We're being played ... yet again.*



## 9. Greensboro Gaffe (May 2013)

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

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

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

“Have you seen Jim?” he suddenly asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll text him.”

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

Own m’eye whey, two blocks tew weigh.

Several minutes went by. Monique was impatient.

“Just call him, 33.”

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

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

We shook hands. He gave Monique a big hug.

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

“Does it involve Jim?” he asked.

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

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

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

“What?!” Monique exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you hungry?” Agent 32 asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ernie!” Monique shouted.

“Blightener!” Agent 14 blurted.

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

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

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

“Is that so?” I asked. No reply.

“Are you wearing a wire, 33?”

“Possibly. How about you, 14?”

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

We all laughed. Nearby diners looked at us.

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

“Yeah, he’s on his game tonight.”

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

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

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

I realized that even my current thoughts were lines in the last short story – one just like this one – the one that you are reading now. *These recursive looping spirals ... always in all ways, well, they do so go.*

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

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

“Still lost in Plasma-Wigwood, 33?”

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

“They, themselves. Them elves, on them shelves.”

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

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

“I don’t know what you guys are talking about,” Monique then quipped.”

“Me, either,” I said.

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

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

“What?” I just shook my head and smiled. *Agent 14 is really onto our little game ... but how? Were we that obvious? Were our breadcrumbs not biodegrading in the cold March rains?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

“Is that you, Jim?” Agent 14 asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 10. **NoDa Soda** (May 2013)

Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) moseyed over to The Smelly Cat coffeehouse on East 36<sup>th</sup> Street in NoDa (North Davidson, Charlotte, NC, USA), after having eaten a tasty Sunday brunch at Cabo Fish Taco. I ordered us a pair of Monique's favorite: caramel-flavored black coffee, extra sweet, lots of whipped cream. Now she had 600 calories to burn.

We found a cozy table outside. The April morning air was pleasantly dry and mild. I began to tell Monique about NoDa in the 1990s, starting out with 1991 – the year I arrived on the scene under the nom de brosse (art name) of m. van tryke.

Monique had virtually no knowledge of NoDa's history, as she didn't live in Charlotte prior to 2011 (when we got married). I told her that this energetic guy from the Boston area named Terry Carano (may he rest in peace) got smitten by the art bug late in life and decided to go for it, all out, no marketing methods barred.

"So, where did Terry go to art school?" Monique asked.

"Carano graduated from the School of Naïveté with honors. He was determined to create the most famous co-op art gallery in the world: Absinthe."

"Absinthe?" Monique asked. "What is Absinthe?"

"It's a liquor concoction that 19<sup>th</sup> century artists would drink for inspiration. The green fairy, they would often call it. It's made from wormwood" *Wigwood?*

“Oh, did you ever drink any?”

“No, I’ve never tried it, but you can buy it at the ABC store. Terry just wanted an art-related name, I guess.”

“Did the gallery become world famous?” Monique asked with raised eyebrows. Cute Asian eyebrows.

“Uh, not exactly, Agent 32. It’s now the place where we just ate.” *Agent 32? Yep, he’s recording.*

“Cabo Fish Taco, Agent 33?” *She knows I’m recording. Good.*

“Yeah, that would be the space. Actually, that space became 23 Studio during the summer of ‘92. Another artist named Lepton Neutrino – or more commonly known as Steve Holt – kept the ship off the rocks until the fall of 2002. Then the old Woolworth Building was felled, and the Cabo edifice was built.”

“I see.” Monique was genuinely intrigued by the history.

“We had quite an amazingly improbable run. All kinds of art and artists passed through there over those 11 years. There were some monumental turnouts on Gallery Crawl nights.”

“Gallery crawl nights?” Monique asked with a bewildered look.

“The first Friday of every month. And, later on, the third Friday was added. Though, it was always much smaller than the first Friday.”

“Was any art being purchased, or was it just a roaming drunk fest?”

“Art was actually being bought and sold. Just ask Jerry Kirk (Agent 51). And, no, it wasn’t just a mindless drunk fest. Well, not in the beginning, or not in the middle.”

“How about the artists ... did any of you become famous?”

“No, not that I am aware of. However, Joe Behm (may he rest in peace, too) would announce to everyone that came in the door that we were the best artists in the world.” I chuckled. “It made us feel good. What a showman that guy was. A natural barker.” *Barker?*

“Where are Terry and Joe now?”

“Uh, they’re dead.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s ok. They weren’t spring chickens when they checked out. They had an honest go at it.” I paused for a few seconds to watch some cyclists pass by. “Those early Gallery Crawls were something else. They were pack-a-zoid, [*sic*] Monique. The sidewalks were so jammed; strollers were forced into the street. Bands – like The Ravelers and Tranzend – would play behind the gallery. Eventually, Pat’s Tavern was internally connected to 23 Studio to facilitate alcohol transit. We even shot Z-Axis public access videos in the gallery. Fun times. Great memories.”

“Wow! I wish that I could have been here then.”

“Well, I was looking for you, Agent 32.”

“I bet you were, 33.” She laughed.

“Oh, and we had this lounge-like setting inside 23 Studio.”

“Really?”

“Yep. The artists and their friends would sit on the couches and chairs and chat about art – and many non-art – matters.”

“A salon?”

“Of sorts. Of odd sorts. Yeah, it was whey kewl.” [*sic*]

“Parkaar, [my ailing alias] I don’t trust your word spellings.”

“Are you seeing my words again, you synesthesiatic one, 32?”

Monique laughed for a few seconds. “No, I just know your word games, 33. Remember, I’m your poof weeder [*sic*] nonpareil.”

“Oh, yes. Now, how could eyes [*sic*] forget?”

“I don’t know. How could they?”

“Well, I seem to forget many things in my old age.”

“You’re not that old!”

“I’m ancient history, Agent 32. I’m yesterday’s slightly emetic aftertaste.”

“You’re making bizarre statements again for the audio recorder, aren’t you?” Monique asked with a stern look.

But, before I could respond to Monique's question, an early 40s Latino hipster dude stopped at our table. He leaned over.

"Hey man, I heard you guys talking about the NoDa scene in the '90s. I was there, too. I was even there in 1990 when it was known as the Historic North Charlotte Arts District."

"Yeah, I remember that mouthful of an appellation."

"Appalachian?" Monique asked, looking very confused.

"Well, it sounds like that, Monique, but isn't quite as inclined." I looked back at the Hispanic hipster. "Hey, who coined the term NoDa anyway?"

The Hispanic hipster groomed his goatee. "Boy, I've heard that debate many times. One time back in '94, this guy asked me at 35<sup>th</sup> and North Davidson: 'Is this NoDa?' I just said: 'No dah. Not, no duh, dude.' I even repeated it for emphasis."

"And, what happened?" I asked, intrigued by his anecdote.

"He just kept walking up the sidewalk," the hipster dude said. "Not sure if it sank in with him. He seemed pretty focked [*sic*] up. Totally wasted."

The Latino hipster dude then moved along towards Yadkin Avenue. Twenty seconds later, and he was gone. *Wonder where he's going? / Is he off to get a fix?*

Monique looked across East 36th Street at the Neighborhood Theater. "What is that over there?"



“Well, it was once a movie theater. Then it was a church. And now, it’s NoDa’s premier music hall. Bands play there. Todd Rundgren played there. And, get this <cough> supposedly when Mr. Rundgren saw the marquee sign with his name in assorted letter colors, fonts and sizes, he exclaimed: “Jeez-us effing Christ, what the hell happened to my career?!”

Monique had a quizzical look. “He’s a famous artist?”

“Yes, a musical artist. That nice song we heard on the radio the other day: *I saw the light*. That’s him.”

“Oh, I see. Did he stop in at 23 Studio?”

“I don’t think so, Monique. I think he just played, then split for the next town. He’s a busy man.”

“Did Frank (now-deceased Agent 107; may he rest in peace, as well) and Mike (Agent 2) ever come up here?” Monique asked while continuing to study the marquee.

“Yes, many times, Monique. Many, many times.”

“I feel like I got cheated out of something, 33.”

“Ah, don’t feel like that, 32. That initial NoDa phase was fun, but the current phase is kewl, [*sic*] too. Though, there sure aren’t many art galleries left.”

“Maybe the recession of ’08 knocked them out?”

“Yeah, maybe so. People are more likely to buy beer and coffee before artwork.”

Monique was still very interested, and continued with her questions. “What was this area initially?”

“A textile mill village. The little one-bedroom house that I owned on Mercury Street was a millhouse. Thread workers lived in that house long before me.” *Thread workers?*

Monique noticed a dark-haired, 20-something, Asian female walking up. “Gosh, that girl has so many tattoos.”

“Yeah, the ink flows all over the skin down here. Kind of like in Plasma-Wigwood.” [local slang for the Plaza-Midwood area of Charlotte]

“Which area do you prefer, Agent 33? The node or the wig?”

“Nice compact coinages, Agent 32. Glad the recorder is on. I may have forgot that when write-up time came along.”

“Well, which one, Parkaar?”

“Hard to say. It seems to vary. I’m just glad that Charlotte finally has more than one hip area. For the longest time this city had no hip scenes - zero, zilch, nil. It was sad.”

Our conversation went on like this for another thirteen minutes. That’s when the barista came outside and asked if we wanted anything else. We told her that we were good. She thanked us for coming.

We got up and began to walk back to the van, which I had parked in front of Cabo Fish Taco. We stopped near The Evening Muse for a minute.

“Ah, if these walls could talk, what language do you think they would speak in, Agent 32?”

“Mortarese?” [sic] *She’s on her game today.*

I laughed. “Good one, Monique. A certified winner there. That’s crisp money. I’ll use that one later.”

Next, I looked down the sidewalk. In one of the slab cracks was a silver piece of metal. I bent down and picked it up. It was a miniature chrome skull with an eyelet for a chain on top. I showed it to Monique.

“Yikes!” Monique exclaimed. “That’s creepy as hell.”

“It must have fallen off of someone’s necklace.” I placed it in my front pocket.

“You’re going to keep that and bring it into our home?”

“Why not? A memento of our day in NoDa. I’ll engrave today’s date on it.”

“It might bring bad luck.”

“Nah, it’ll be ok. You are watching too many horror movies on Comet with Agent 666.”

“Ok, but hide it somewhere; I don’t want to see it.”

“Sure. No problem. Consider it done, 32. Disappeared.”

Now, back in the old green van, we headed up North Davidson Street. We slowly crossed over the railroad track mound after 36<sup>th</sup> Street. I then pointed to the right at a small, old, beige-colored millhouse.

“Well, that was where I lived, Monique, from December of '94 to December of '97. Almost exactly three years to the day.”

“Were you alone in that house for those three years, Parkaar?”

“Very much alone, I assure you.” *Hmmmm ...*

I turned right onto Mercury Street and looked at the front porch. *Looks about the same. Just a different color of paint. I wonder if the new owners have found those notes about the NoDa Soda formulation.*

We crossed another railroad mound and then turned right onto North Alexander Street to arrive back at 36<sup>th</sup> Street. I turned right and we passed the Neighborhood Theater. Then I turned left at the light to head south (towards downtown/uptown) on North Davidson Street. As we passed 35<sup>th</sup> Street, I pointed to the left.

“A bar called The Aardvark used to be there, Monique. It was Joe Behm’s bar.”

“When was this?” she asked. “Did he have the bar and a share of Absinthe?”

“Oh, this is going way back, 32 ... probably all the way back to 1992. I believe that he did one before the other, but the chronology escapes me. Anyway, the Aardvark was belly-up by '96, maybe earlier. It didn’t last that long. Though, I can still remember the late Joe Behm saying, after I rang the tip bell without yet buying anything, ‘Sir, if we lose control of the

bell, we lose control of everything!' Truly epik [sic] with a k. What a character he was."

We continued driving towards downtown/uptown Charlotte. We could see the tall buildings rising at the end of the railroad yard.

"See, it's not that far from downtown, Monique. It's probably just two miles as a crow flies."

"Does a crow always fly in a straight line, Parkaar?"

"Only when the crow is trying to live up to that old saying, Agent 32."

Monique laughed and looked over to her left. "So, what's this area called? It looks kinda scary."

"This is Villa Heights. Soon it will be trendy, too."

"No way!" she retorted.

"Sure way. Look how close it is to downtown. The millennials love living close to work."

We were now crossing 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Traffic was light.

I continued with my real estate predictions. "Heck, even this Belmont neighborhood will be bo-ho chic someday."

"So, you think NoDa will get scooped someday by the neighborhoods closer to downtown, 33?"

"I don't know if NoDa will ever get totally scooped, as these areas down here are pretty much just residential with only a few shops. The main scene will still be in NoDa, I would

suspect ... but, who knows? Oh, we just passed Area 15. It was once so underground that you had to be in the know to even know where it was. And, look at it now. Oh, how it has sprouted. They have a kewl rehab bike store, too.”

Monique looked to her right intently. “Oh, yes, I see it.”

“Once the Lynx Blue Line gets extended, all of these areas should really take off. NoDa will get a big boost out of it, as there will be a station at 36<sup>th</sup> Street. Even the now-scary Howie Acres at Sugar Creek & Eastway will see an amazing upward transformation. I just wish I had the cash to buy one of those small houses on Bearwood Avenue.”

“Will it spiralize [*sic*] upward, Parkaar?”

“Spiralize.” I chuckled. “Very funny, Monique. I guess you were right on cue with replaying that inanity, as I was starting to sound like a real estate commercial.” <cough> “But, you know, thinking back ... NoDa in 1990 was scary territory. People would sometimes get mugged after leaving one of the two art galleries. Most of the storefronts were still boarded up ... or worse, not boarded up, and being used by crackheads. Thus, we started a citizen’s patrol. We were armed with flashlights. You know how cockroaches hate bright lights. It was actually fairly effective.”

“Sounds like it was an uphill battle, 33.”

“Yeah, it definitely was during the first half of the ‘90s decade, Monique.”

“Can I see that skull trinket that you picked up?”

“I thought you were afraid of it.”

“Phobia suddenly cured. Let’s see it, Parkaar. Cough it up.”

<cough> “Ok, one sec, 32.”

“We need to stop at a pharmacy and get you some cough medicine. I don’t want you to croak on me just yet, 33.”  
*Croak on me? She’s already picking up American idiomatic expressions.*

We both had a laugh.

Then I retrieved the little chrome skull and gave it to Monique. For some strange unfathomable reason, at that very moment, I remembered a great NoDa/Z-Axis videographer who passed away on June 30, 2000: Bruce Gillenwater (may he rest in peace, too).

I became lost in thought. *Bruce ... what a kewl guy he was. And, what a trip down memory lane this has been. I’m going to enjoy writing this one up next Monday. Random Recollections of the 1990s on North Davidson.*

## 11. **Boone There ~ Fun That** (May 2013)

And the search for Jim continued in the NC Mountains ...

Jim. Jim, Jim, Jim, ever heard of him? No, not your best friend, lover, husband, brother, nephew or uncle (or self?) – *that* Jim. The other one. The odd duck. The uniquely weird one. Unintentionally strange, but not harmful. A minimal art-form in himself, and a resounding arthouse flop.

Yeah, the neosurreal gem. The meta-real mistake. The one who stopped time with Jill. You know, that less-than-comical series on Facebook. (Relax, 99.999% of the planet has no idea, either.)

Jim and Jill. The timeless sequence that Jill wants out of, but Jim is content with. (Frames can be seen on the psecret psociety Facebook page.) The one where the characters never move. Yeah, that one, where they only read each other's thoughts. Why, I know, it seems like an excruciating exercise in ennui. And it was/is. Trust me. You may need another mug of coffee (or beer) just to survive this preface.

Jim, the quasi-scientific mind experiment that went awry. They scrambled his bean pretty good. Really overhauled it. The Caucasian middle-age lad isn't sure if he is – or was – even alive. Poor guy. I'm not a litigious type, but someone deserves to be sued for that.

Ah, here she comes. Agent 32 is now in the house, or hotel room.

"Thanks for the extra-spatial [*sic*] tea, Monique." [alias of Agent 32]



Ok, some more background on Jim and Jill. Well, to make a short story slightly longer, Jill said that Jim escaped from some meta-space. Yes, a space beyond a space. (I was lost, as well.) And then, well, she got herself sucked into it, too. This was stated in her last e-mail.

But, maybe you've seen Jim wafting up and down the Boone-area ski slopes. Not sure? No, he doesn't look like Frankenstein. He's not a mu-mu (Tagalog for monster, Agent 32 tells me). You can check the psecret psociety page on Facebook. Ok, I'll save you a trip to the internet: Just jump to the end of this story by clicking [here](#). But, please do return.

-----{early intermission}-----

Ok, I assume that you came back. Thanks. A lot. And a future house. Ok, let's get this tale moving again. Moving along with cilia action (or, maybe not).

We arrived at the old Greene's Motel on US 321 in Boone (NC, USA) on a cold, cloudy, gray December afternoon. Castle weather, we would often call it. I think it was the Thursday between Christmas and New Year's. Yeah, that sounds about right. Let's go with that.

<clink> Our glasses touch.

Well, we got one of the upper level rooms with a nice view of a mountain ridge ... and of a tarpaulin-covered pool.

"No swimming tonight, Agent 32."

"Probably not, Parkaar, [my ailing alias] unless you packed our froggish [*sic*] wetsuits."

Monique (my wife) got the luggage unpacked. She checked the drawers for notes and other less obvious clues.

My son, Agent-to-be 666 (yes, he demanded that number), began to play on the dresser with one of his Hot Wheels cars, a white '68 Shelby Mustang with a blue duo-stripe.

I checked the closet for any notes or curios, as you never know who plays the hotel games. And, Jim certainly would participate in them. All ways and all waves.

Oh, speaking of hotel games, did you know that Marty Balin of Jefferson Airplane/Starship used to carefully remove hotel room artwork from the frame and add sketches of miniature fornicating stick figures? Yes, really. Then he would carefully replace the print in the frame and hang it back on the wall. Apparently he did it so discreetly that you would only notice it if you were zoning in on a detail of the art from, say, four inches away. Sways, eh? Give that man a game ball.

Relax, we didn't deface any art at the Greene's. The velvet Elvis still had the added Camel cigarette. We didn't do it; it was already there. College hipsters these days.

We got settled in as darkness fell on the valley of Winkler Creek. Old ripped van Winkler. Where is he now?

Well, everyone was hungry. I asked 32 to watch 666, as I was going out to procure some food for our dinner.

I walked over to the nearby Pizza Hut and brought back a couple of thin crusters. [*sic*] I thought about writing *Fold Online* on the pizza box, and leaving it for the maid to

consider. But, I decided it was way too obscure. Maybe just scrap it. We did.

After we finished eating, a snow-sleet shower started to sprinkle and tinkle. Then, within thirteen minutes, it was all white snow, and coming down at a jolly good clip.

We walked out on the balcony to take it all in: a splendid winter night in Appalachia. The onset of snow is always a magic time. Unless, you've got 110 miles to drive.

Then I asked my wife and son if they had any ideas for my next short story – the one you are reading now – and they pondered my question for a few moments.

My son fired back first. “Dad, how about staging a car accident scene using my Hot Wheels car? You could zoom in on the scene so close that the car would look like a full-size '68 Shelby Mustang.”

His idea intrigued me. “Agent 666, that is a grand idea. But, are you sure that you don't want a different agent number?”

“I want to keep triple-six for life!” he demanded vociferously.

“Ok, ok,” I relented. “But, some may be ruffled by it.”

“I don't care!” he screamed. “It's my number!”

My son continued with his idea for a Boone-based short story. He told me that we could say that we were on Jim's trail, closing in on him, when we got into a car chase with him. He said that Jim would lose us temporarily on a Blue Ridge Parkway curve. But after passing through a tunnel, we would find his car stuck in a tall wall of snow.

“I love this idea, son. So, Jim crashes into a snowbank. Let’s go with it.”

Monique then chimed in. “I’d add some spice to your silly little tale, 33. Female readers love interpersonal drama. Tell them that another head was seen in the car – a female’s head – the head of Jill.” *Nice touch.*

“Oh, I like it, 32. Jim and Jill fleeing from us on the Blue Ridge Parkway in an evening snowstorm.”

Monique went on to tell me to write the story up in a way that made Jill look like the evil mind behind the escapade. I asked Monique what Jill had done wrong – just for our story’s sake. She told me that I could insinuate that Jill really did control the electronic chip inside Jim’s brain.

Then Monique blurted, “Insist that Jill made Jim walk into the bank and demand money.”

“What bank?” I asked.

“A local one. Just say that it was a Boone bank.”

“So, they’ll be bank robbers?” my son asked.

I groaned. I was non-elated with this premise. I never saw either of these characters as bank robbers. In fact, I never saw them doing much of anything, action-wise. But then, after a Duck Rabbit dark beer, it won me over.

I would later ask Agents 32 and 666 how we could tie this in with a Mount Mayon Volcano eruption in the Philippines. But, they just looked at me, mouths agape. My son muttered something about how I always ruin a good story with

extraneous material. Monique just sighed, and poured herself a glass of Merlot.

To tell you the truth, I was quite happy. My body wasn't in pain, and we were off the icy roads for the night, safely ensconced in a concrete cocoon, composing a surreal short story together as the snow fell outside. A perfect mountain escape from the Charlotte chatter.

Then a phone was vibrating. It was my cell phone on the nightstand. I grabbed it. An unknown number. I didn't answer it. The anonymous caller left no message.

"Monique, could you kindly research the 333 area code?" I kindly asked my wife, who was now lying on the bed closest to the window.

She quickly looked it up on her tablet computer and reported back her findings. "The 333 area code hasn't been activated yet. No phone numbers have that area code, Parkaar." *Very strange.*

At first I was completely dumbfounded, but then I had a hunch who it was. My son thought it was Jim, too.

Monique looked at the door. It was already locked. I told her that we would be ok, and that Jim was just a cerebral killer – not a serial one.

Future Agent 666 then asked me if I thought that our hotel room was bugged. I told both of them that I saw a column of ants marching on the aluminum window frame, but other than that, all was ok.

Monique said that she saw an earwig in the tub, but it didn't look like Ernie, so she smashed it with my Bukowski *Earth Poems* book. I was like, "Oh, no, you didn't." I told her that was my crapper reading material.

She then scraped the insect's remains off the back cover with her nail file. Then she wiped the back cover with an alcohol pad.

And, it went on like this until we burned the popcorn in the ancient, paint-flaking-away, rusted microwave. We were all sound asleep by 2:02 AM.

We awoke to a partly cloudy morning with a few flurries, and decided to get serious about our gem of a ruse. Outside we marched. It was brisk.

The macro-photo was fairly convincing. If you didn't study the photo with a magnifying glass, you would think that a real '68 Shelby Mustang ran off the road into a ten-foot-high snowdrift.

We agreed to say that neither Jim's, nor Jill's, body was ever found. And, that when the cops found the car, *Bonaparte's Retreat* was playing.

Why *Bonaparte's Retreat*, you ask? Ok, some much-needed background. Sorry for the temporary disconnect.

In one of Bukowski's *poems de terre*, there is this guy named Fred who loves the song *Bonaparte's Retreat*. (In fact, that's the name of the poem.) He was one of those older guys at the bar who never speaks to anyone. Some drained soul just riding out the clock.

Well, old Fred died before I could mention him here. I bet when he was a wee lad, he lived up North somewhere where it snows fairly often. Maybe in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Hell, maybe in Minneapolis, North Carolina. Well, he had teeth. Just jesting. Put the gun down, partner. I'm buying.

I bet as a child, Fred had a small toy car, or maybe four. I bet he made snow sherbet. But, I bet he pronounced it sher-BERT. Sure, Bert. You know that was his pal.

And more on Jim. Whenever reviewing his past results, Jim would refer to himself as they. He would spout off something like: "Ah, look what they did last year; they can beat that number." A perplexing use of pronouns, for sure.

You know that sensation when you're in a train, waiting to go, and an adjacent train starts to creep along in the opposite direction, and you feel like your train is moving, when, in fact, it's still stopped? I believe they call it avection illusion. Well, Jim was vexed by the exact opposite from an early age. He would often feel that his train was stationary, even as the outside scene whizzed by at high speed.

Driving a car was obviously a bit of a challenge for Jim. He had to take special medications to do it.

Then my son told me that we had it all wrapped up, and were ready for the bow and ribbon. Yes, it was time to put the icing on this cold-azz [*sic*] cake.

Agent 666 told me that we should state that Jim was speeding on an icy road on a snowy night and crashed due to a moment of invection. *Sure, why not?*

I told both of them that Ernie would probably buy it. Though, I bet we never see any money. Par for the curse. [sic]

I reached for Monique's coffee cup. It was now lukewarm. I set it back down.

We hid copies of previous short stories throughout the old hotel room. *Someone is going to flip their wig when they find these. / I wish I could see the person's face when they find the first copy. / Dad sure has some strange hobbies.*



Jill and Jim in their timeless existence

Click [here](#) to return to story.



## 12. Siquijor Seduction Zone (May 2013)

Herein lies the initial meeting of Agents 32 and 33.

Monique (future Agent 32) friend-requested me (future Agent 33) on Facebook on May 10, 2010. We know this was the date because Monique still had the friend-request confirmation e-mail, which she stumbled upon while cleaning up her Yahoo inbox.

Back at that time, there was no psecret psociety. We were lingering in the shade of the Café 23 flag, meandering to Chet Baker. I would encourage our nascent cottage coterie by stating things like: “Ultimately, there are no non sequiturs – none – undone.”

It was a lot of punnery, [sic] puzzlery, [sic] and puffoonery. [sic] Some caught the pop fly and had a ball. Others felt wise to do otherwise.

We waded in wordplay by day; lounged like chaised [sic] lizards by night. We even brought Café 23 to real – physical – bars in Metro Charlotte and Greater Los Angeles. Wait, maybe that was the early psecret psociety phase. *Early onset cosmosis. [sic]*

Anyway, we decided to drop the Café 23 banner altogether, as there were java joints around the globe using that alphanumeric name. Lawsuits just didn’t fit our frame of preference. We certainly didn’t want to be pulled into a court room in Rotterdam. Well, actually, if the trip was pre-paid with some free time ... yes, that would be very tempting.

I recall a recon trip to Central Coffee at Louise & Central Avenues (in Charlotte). I asked them if I could leave a few short stories on the literature shelf – like this short story, the one you are reading now – and they stoically declined. I remember thinking: *What kind of non-chain coffeehouse doesn't allow local publications? A boring one.*

I don't know about you (though, I would bet my imaginary pot farm that you are smarter than me and way more interesting), but local lit is the first thing I alight to when I go into a coffeehouse. *Ah, maybe they're just following the Starbucks model of the sterilized faux coffeehouse experience.*

My thoughts would later be confirmed by an independent older Caucasian lady who noticed our lurid, soccer-length socks and neon shirts, and cheerfully said: “Only happy people wear bright colors.”

I replied, telling her that we were indeed happy, but the bright colors were primarily for safety, as we were riding our bikes. She smiled and walked on.

Ah, but let's get back to 2010. Our amorous online correspondence continued through the spring and summer. Chats, messages, e-mails, and all that 'hidden between the lines' stuff. However, no sausage or tunnel shots. We stayed aboveboard, though there were some high swells.

Then on September 20<sup>th</sup>, I left for Monique's mysterious island of Siquijor. “Isla del Fuego,” [Fire Island] the Spanish called it when they sailed past the southern coast in 1565. No, not because the small island was aflame, but because

there were so many fireflies (or lightning bugs as they call them here). In fact, they say that they lit up the Narra trees, and were collectively visible from miles away in the Bohol Sea.

Well, I know that leading off sentences with well is not smiled upon by those steeped in English prose. But after 22 hours of combined flight and airport time, I was in Dumaguete. The coastal city on the southeastern bulge of Negros Oriental was already bustling in the humid, morning heat.

I then caught the ferry to Siquijor town. The passage was relatively calm, and took about 50 minutes.

Once on Siquijor Island, I took a 38-minute (yes, I timed it; such a temporal nerd I am) jeepney journey to the town of Lazi on the south coast. A half mile up from the sea, I finally saw Monique for the first time on Aljas Street at Alvarico Street around noon. She was more charming than expected. What a doll. A pinay princess with a heart of gold. I spoke first.

“Ah, it’s so great to finally meet you, Monique. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you, Parkaar, [my ailing alias] but those are your words, not mine.”

“My words are true, my dear. I tell no lie, standing, sitting, or lying.” *Or lying?*

“What did you just say?” she asked, sensing a pun run.

“Come closer, and I’ll whisper it in your ear.”

She laughed for a couple of seconds. “Ok, sure.”

Monique walked up to me. I bent my head down and kissed her on the lips. Then I whispered in her right ear: “Mahal kita.” [‘I love you’ in Tagalog, the official Filipino dialect]

“Wow, are you getting ahead of yourself, kano?” [kano is Filipino slang for an American (from WW2)]

I chuckled. “I’d pass my self by to get to your self any day, Monique. You are truly better than imagined or advertised.”  
*Advertised? What?!*

“You are making strange statements for your audio recorder that you told me about, aren’t you, Parkaar?”

“Somehow, I knew that you would say that, Monique. Somehow I just knew.”

“I am already onto your little game, dodong.” [young man in Cebuano, the primary dialect of the Central Visayas region of the Philippines]

“Holy dodoy, daday! [made-up nonsensical Cebuano-sounding words] Hey, let’s go to a beach resort, sexy lady.”  
*Yey, he thinks that I’m sexy.*

“How about Salagdoong? It has a great view of Maria Bay. And, it has air-con, [air-con is Filipino slang for air conditioning or air conditioner] my loverboy.” *Condoms? Check. / I hope he’s disease-free.*

“Sure, let’s do it.” *Absolutely. / Wow!*

“But, you first have to meet my parents. They are so eager to meet you, Parkaar.”

“Why, most certainly, Monique!”

We walked about 100 meters to Monique’s parental home. I met her engaging mom and relaxed dad. After a two-hour chat, we bid them adieu and hailed a pedicab (a motorcycle-powered passenger vehicle, a very common mode of transportation in the Philippines).

It was a scenic 15-km ride to the resort that took 23 minutes on the Circumferential Road. The pedicab then pulled off the asphalt onto some sandy gravel.

“Ah, we’re here.” Monique said.

“Nice place. Good first choice, my gwapa pinay.” [pretty Filipina]

“Salamat, mahal.” [‘Thank you, love’ in Tagalog]

“Walay sapayan, [‘You’re welcome’ in Cebuano] mahal.”

We walked up to the hotel office and got a room on the top (3<sup>rd</sup>) floor. Once inside the room, I walked out on the balcony. The view was travel-show magnificent. *Calling Rick Steves.*

“Wow, you were right, Monique; the view is phenomenal.”

“I know my little island.” *Indeed she does.*

The whole C-shaped shoreline of Maria Bay was visible. The bay’s water was many shades of blue: a splotch of cerulean

here, some indigo there, some azure further out to sea. A tropical postcard it most surely was.

I turned around, and Monique gave me the 'well, we're here, and the time is right' look.

We got busy in paradise. An order of pumperoni [*sic*] pizza. Salami in tunneloni. [*sic*] There were worse places and times on this old orb.

After the initial round of carnal lust, we made our way down to this craggy small conical island that was connected to the mainland by a gangplank. We climbed up to a rocky precipice, about nine meters (29.5 feet for my American readers) above the crystal-clear water.

"Want to jump? It looks deep enough, Monique."

"No, not today, Parkaar."

"Chicken."

"Seafood."

"Shark!" I exclaimed as I saw a six-footer pass by, right where I planned to hit the water. I passed.

It was a night of fun and frolic under a giddy gibbous moon. The high clouds were like moving drapes.

Sleep was full of pleasant dreams, one of which, the last one, involved a found message. However, when I awoke the context quickly crumbled to the sand on the floor.

We checked out after a simple breakfast, and headed to our 2<sup>nd</sup> resort: Princesa Bulakna. It was just 2 km away.

We got a cottage up on the hill. Another magical place. When Monique laid down poolside, I took a photo, which matched the pool's edge with the bay's horizon line. One of those 'the ocean is my infinite pool' shots.

Later, I hid a short story – like the one you are reading now – somewhere in the rafters. *I wonder if it's still there.*

I almost fell down placing it. Monique chuckled. It was good times in the equatorial Pacific.

We fell asleep early, worn out by hiking the grounds. There was a strange <bump> in the middle of the night.

“What was that, Parkaar?!” Monique was scared.

“I’ll go outside and check it out.”

“No! Don’t open the door! It’s too risky.”

I sat back on the bed, holding Monique until she fell back asleep on my chest. Nothing happened. The rest of the night was without a bump or a thump.

In the morning when I opened the door, I saw a note on one of the stepping stones, which read:

Don't forget to check the lizard's tongue.

Monique saw me pick it up. “What is that?”

“Some kind of note.”

“It looks like a fortune-cookie message.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“Do you think someone left it there last night, Parkaar?”

“Maybe so.”

Then we walked down to the office to check out. We saw this blue concrete lizard with a similar note on its forked tongue, which read:

So serene is Serena?

And with those cues, we were off to the Serena Beach Resort in San Juan on the western side of the island. It was owned by a Japanese couple.

Ken showed us to our room. We were one of the few guests there that day. A very quiet place. Well, it was until sunset.

That’s when all hell broke loose. The older Brit next door, a former judge in the UK, had been drinking all day with his pals. They were blotto-splotto-fuck-you drunk. Yes, belligerently intoxicated.

Suddenly, one of them started to rev their motorcycle very loudly on the other side of the privacy wall. We had to cover our ears. It was that loud.

Ken saw this and rushed over to confront the Englishman. They began to curse and cuss at each other. They even pulled out WW2 epithets. Very ugly. It got very heated. There were threats of bodily harm. We expected gunfire at any moment.



Monique was scared. We moved to a position where we couldn't be struck by a stray bullet. Luckily, no shots were fired. *Whew! Tragedy narrowly averted.*

The bluster subsided with both saying that they were going to report the other to the barangay captain (neighborhood leader) in the morning.

Ken then came back and apologized for the ruckus. I just told him that these things happen when you combine 12 hours of hot sun with 12 hours of heavy drinking.

We went back to our room and passed out. If I had a dream, it was quickly forgotten ... or shot down.

After a serene breakfast, we checked out. We hailed a jeepney (a Philippines-style bus) and headed down to Coco Grove, only 3 km away.

This seaside resort, probably the most luxurious and most expensive on the island, was popular with international tourists. We heard Swedish, French, Dutch and German in the main café. Some already-loaded Americans kept staring at Monique. *Jeez, I can't get away from annoying kanos, even halfway around the world!*

Monique was not appreciating their stares. "Why do they keep looking at me?"

"Your sublime beauty attracts the American males' eyes."

"It annoys me. Let's go back to our room."

We did. Afternoon delight. The dance of the old wang doodle. Well, you get the scene. Life was grand.

Later, we caught an amazing sunset on the beach. The yellow-orange, ovalized, swollen blob quickly sank below the green mountains of Negros (the island to the west).

As dusk filtered in, the west wind picked up. It felt good. Refreshing. Mind invigorating.

The swells were white-capping at the ledge of the coral reef. A floating bottle was being blown in. When it was in only two feet of water, I walked out and grabbed it. There was a note inside. *Wow, a message in a bottle. How kewl [sic] is this.*

I removed the cork and shook it. Monique caught the little note as it fell out.

“Is it from Sidonie Fery?” [mentioned in the *Bottled* short story]

“Who’s that?” Monique asked with a curious expression on her tan face.

“I’ve no idea. It’s like someone or some entity temporarily took over my mouth.”

“Parkaar, you are one silly kano!” *Agreed.*

She then proceeded to read the message aloud.

“Pag-ibig at tumawa,” [love and laughter in Tagalog] she announced to me with a sexy smile.

“Is that Tagalog?” I asked.

“Yes, it is, my Parkaar.” *My Parkaar. I like that.*

“Oh, wow, what does it mean, Monique de Mystique?”  
*Monique de Mystique? Looks like I have a word-art-baller on my hands.*

“It means that we have to go to *Tumawa* to find out.”

“What! *Tumawa*? Where is that? I didn’t see it on any map.”

“Let’s just keep going the way we’ve been going, my dear kano.”

“Sounds good to me, asawa-to-be.” [asawa is wife in Filipino]  
*Yey, he wants to marry me!*

“Me, too, my bana-in-waiting kano.” [bana is husband in Cebuano]

And then, out by the reef’s edge, a dorsal fin passed by.  
*These tropical waters are no joke. Sharks, highly toxic jellyfish, lethal sea snakes, and moray eels. I think I’ll pass on the sea swimming. Don’t want to end up in a hospital ... or worse. / Effective notes.*

### 13. **Psatori** (June 2013)

We, Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33), decided to ride our bikes over to the trendy NoDa area (northeast Charlotte), seeking satori, sustenance, and serendipity (with a silent *p* in front of each *s* word in the final report). Yeah, pstuff [sic] like that.

We kept watch on our wheel-view mirrors. I moved up alongside Monique on East 35<sup>th</sup> Street. Though, boredom was gaining on us by Charles Avenue. Then, a girl on the lawn with her head in her hands.

“Hey, Monique, is she crying or laughing?”

“Probably neither, either.” *Neither, either? What did she just say?*

“Ah, blame it on the ether, 32” *Yep, he’s recording already.*

We arrived at Boudreaux’s at 12:12, m’eyes [sic] will kid you not. We got a small table outside. Well, we couldn’t seek refuge in Frank’s store anymore. (R-I-P, Agent 107.)

A lesbian couple was having a fascinating conversation at a table beside us. The short African American lady said to the tall Caucasian American lady that she had to leave her now-ex-girlfriend in South Carolina. Something about catching her having sex with some gay dude. *WTF!*

The compact, black lady said, “Yeah, he was a common friend, or something. When I confronted her, she said that it

doesn't count as cheating if it's with a gay dude. Can you imagine that?" *Am I really hearing this?*

The white female replied, "But she had a real penis in her vagina!" *Wow! Never expected to hear this when I woke up today. Glad the audio recorder is running. Great stuff for a short story. Primo dialogue. This one will write itself.*

I leaned down and furtively whispered to Monique. "Did you hear that exchange, 32?"

"The women right beside us?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, I heard them. Bizarre."

"Welcome to the NoDa."

At a table just up from ours, an apparent first or second date was in progress. Some goo-goo eyes. Monique looks at the young, black-haired lady.

Monique then turns her head back to me. "The Asian girl appears to be pinay, [a lady from the Philippines] Parkaar." [my ailing alias] Monique studied her more closely.

I glanced at the 20-something Caucasian guy. "And the guy is a hipster dude. Look at those skinny jeans."

Monique then mentioned something about finding a note inside a discarded lauan interior door.

“What did it say, Agent 32? Do tell. Speak into the mic.”

“Between the thin sheets of Philippine mahogany?”

“Yes, and between the vertical lines. Hey, we all want to know. Well, sorta, I still think.” *I’ll just play along with his game.*

“Well, don’t ask me; ask them.”

“Who, Monique?”

“Them. Over there.” She looks at two guys in work clothes.

“The construction workers?”

“No. They’re busy. Don’t bother them.” *She’s surreally on her game – or on my game – today.*

And it went on like this for the next eight minutes. Utter confusion. No rhyme for reason. No time on the broken wall clock.

We finally ordered the seafood gumbo. It appeared on our table in just four minutes. It hit the spot. *Good stuff for this far inland.*

A cyclist almost got hit making a right turn onto East 36<sup>th</sup> Street from North Davidson Street. The left-turning motorist wouldn't yield. Par for the curse [*sic*] in this burgeoning burgette. [*sic*]

"Did you see that, Monique? We almost had a lunch-hour casualty."

"I missed that one, Parkaar. I was watching our newly smitten lovebirds."

I went on and told Monique that I was now finally writing that novel novel (*Gold, a summer story*). It wouldn't be like this – this meandering short story that you are reading right now – it would have some coherence and logical flow to it.

I continued with my novel spiel. "It will even have a central theme, which would be imported and served to all of the characters. Well, maybe just to the main ones. Outliers gonna lie out of bounds, ya know."

"Ok, that's great." Monique ran her hands through her long, silky, jet-black hair.

I smiled then recommenced my novel's plan of attack. "I'll dredge up everything at least once. Sift it twice. Replay it thrice. I'll even agree to the customary conventions of quotation marks, paragraph breaks, discernible referencing, and proper pronoun usage. You know, all that boring stuff. I'll play by their rules." *What did he just say?*

“*Their* rules? Oh, please, there is much to be said for a clear, concise syntax.”

“Sin tax?” *He never misses a low-hanging pun.*

“Oh, you’ll pay. One way or another, Agent 33.”

“Hey, Agent 32, would you like to hear what I have so far?”

“Sure, lay it on me, Parkaar.” *I’ll lay it on her later.*

“Ok, here are some random lines that I will try to weave into the story. One. It can leave holes in the lumber. Two. Oh, the baseball field where I taught my son how to ride a bike is now a drainage canal, but there’s no gold in it. Three. I checked the box four times before returning. Four. It’s lucky Shamrock Drive. Five. She told him how to break writer’s block: When all else fails, just plainly state what is happening in a patently matter-of-fact manner. Patiently reduce it to the simplest terms. For example, start with a sentence like Jack looked at Jane. Even Hemingway would agree to that. Now, the second sentence. See, the strand of possibilities is endless. Block removed. Broken into small pieces. Six. The usual processes were still at work with no vacation in sight. Seven. He kept his mind churning; it smelled like burning rubber. Eight. Gallery graphics are exploding. Nine. Go write a joke. Or, go ride a joke. Ten. He was going all the way. Far away. One day. Until it crashed and burned, he really knew nothing. Eleven. Make sure you tell them what I forgot to say. Twelve. ‘Hey man, want the short line?’ ‘Sure.’ ‘Ok, just



hold this wire for me.' Twelve. 'Who did you like in that all-Deutschland Champions League Final?' Thirteen. Grundel."

"Fourteen's enough, Parkaar. You repeated twelve." *Oh?*

Over at table 3, we heard a quick back and forth, apparently triggered by my Champions League remark.

"Dortmund should've scored in the first 12 minutes."

"Think so?"

"Oh, yeah. At least once."

"Credit Neuer. He came up big in the biggest game."

"No doubt."

Their conversation lost steam. I looked into Monique's pretty dark brown pinay eyes. *Such a Siquijor seductress, she is. I'm one lucky guy.*

"Would you like to hear some more lines, Agent 32?"

"Lines like 'Big Bang theorist,' 'microwave menu for 95 seconds,' 'go easy on the toilet paper dispenser,' 'weave one for me,' 'don't lose your new spare key where the old one disappeared,' 'already in the house and still not home,' ..."

"Ok, ok, you're making me cringe now. How did you find my notes, 32?"

“An agent never tells, 33.”

“Not even if they are married, Monique?”

“The code is the code, and we all live and prosper by it, Parkaar.” *When?*

Moreover, this was NoDa in 2013 on a crisp spring day. There are worse places we could have been. We could have been stuck in the Mecklenburg County Courthouse, parked in the lawyer’s stall. Yeah, that malodorous. But, at this NoDastic moment, it’s actually a keener kewl scene if you spell it the write [*sic*] way.

I began writing notes on the back of a business card as the young lovers glanced our way.

“A nice day today, Monique, but I wouldn’t want to be sitting out here in July.”

“You really do hate hot weather, 33.”

“Yes, I most sure-really do, 32. You know how I despise it.” I looked back at the first-daters table. “Look.”

“Where?”

“Over there.” I nodded towards the amorous couple’s table. “They are now grinning at each other. I bet they are pumping in two hours.”

“Make it one.”

“Ok, one and done and won over by one.” *What?!*

“Who do you think she is?”

“Well, she’s not the lady next door. Not today.”

“I know she’s pinay, Parkaar. She gave me the pinay code look.”

“Oh, really?”

“Oo.” [Yes in Tagalog and Cebuano]

“I wonder if it is raining in Boone.” *Why?*

“At this very moment?”

Before I could answer, I saw a squirrel nearly get squashed by a cable TV van. Monique had followed my eyes and saw the rodent’s near-fatality, too.

“Close call there, 32.”

“Perhaps she was chasing a nut. After all, aren’t they all?”

A large semi rolled by on North Davidson Street, slamming its way across 36<sup>th</sup> Street. *So much for the ambiance.*

“Hey, this aint the truck route anymore, pal,” I grumbled, but I doubt the driver heard me.

Monique then said something about just letting it go.

I looked around at the adjacent tables. The scene caused my mind to do some more back-reeling. I began to think aloud.

“The Hotel Astor at Carolina Beach. [featured prominently in the short story *Carolina Beached*] Why, do any of you remember it? It was at the beginning of Canal Drive. There was that big sign on the roof with the metal supports. Did you climb on it, too? You could see it from a mile down the road in 1986. Nineteen years later it burned down.” An awkward silence.

Then Monique emitted a muted whistle. I looked at her.

“What are you saying, Parkaar? Did you put some crystals in your drink when I wasn’t looking?”

“Huh? And at 1948, the gold melts. Ok, it’s just a working title. We just need to make sure that the total weight of the Au is about 55 pounds. No more than 60; no less than 50. How much is that in kg? More than 100 pounds. It’s hard to find 100 Grand candy bars in this town. Yet, supposedly, hardly anyone likes them. They’re not even in the top 40 of confectionary bestsellers.”

Monique shook her head and looked at the diners at the nearby tables.

“Please excuse him,” she announced to the adjacent diners. “He skipped his medication today.”

“Sorry, folks,” I then added. “I got carried up, up, and away.”

The surrounding diners hurried their eating and drinking. *I guess I shocked them. Must tone it down. Way down. Oh, it's probably too late.*

Monique coughed. “Parkaar, why do you type and copy these little wandering short stories?”

“Because I don't see anyone else doing them, Monique. There's a niche to be filled. Yeah, stick that copy in that crack. Perfect. Plant one in that nook. Good job. Let's put this town on the meta-map, cranny by cranny.” *Meta-map? He's already flying high and wide. He got into the jar before we left. It's obvious.*

Next, the hipsteresque waiter returned. “Are you guys alright? Would you like anything else?”

“Just the check, mate,” I said. *Checkmate. He planned that.*

“Certainly.” The waiter quickly disappeared.

“Dig these novel lines, 32. ‘Rook out with your bishop out.’ ‘Pawn up as knight falls.’ ‘Frank's dead and nothing seems

to matter with space anymore.' 'Awash in astounding credit card debt.' 'All their lies matched up diagonally.' 'Light down the dashed line.' 'Yo, it's starting to slant.' 'Shunt it down, then shut it off.' 'I'll be dead before I live.' Well, what do ya think, Monique? Am I gaining any headway?"

She just shook her head and cleared her bowl.

We paid up and left a nice 22.22% tip.

Once safely across the street, we posted some short stories on the official NoDaBoard, a triangular bulletin board at North Davidson and East 36th. It had a roof on it. Weather protection, no less.

"Monique, we are just playing for one swing. Walk off a hero or die a goat in a moat. Yeah, it sounds like a Secteur de Tryke rip-off. And, it probably is. I'll go back and check those 3.5" floppy discs someday."

"You're really getting some mileage out of those granules, aren't you, 33?"

I just continued my semi-surreal ramble. "Well, the plank is already in place, securely affixed to the transom for ransom. And, in that scene, they're chumming the water with pig's blood in Sheepshead Bay. Yes, my dad always cursed that anodyne. Why? Because, it never worked, except at the worst possible time. None efficacious, though many still roaming the forested hills in tarnished armor."

And, it went on like this for eleven more torturous minutes.

“Are you finished now, 33?”

“Monique, I thought you were going to say, ‘Some sharp commotion around that slight corner. It always seems to start out of a slight.’ Am I right?”

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s it exactly, Parkaar!” *Must try to settle him down.*

We walked up to The Smelly Cat (a coffeehouse). A newly arrived couple had just been seated outside. We got within eavesdropping range. He was telling her some myths about Kerouac’s famous *On the Road* novel.

“You know, Kate, he did not write that novel in one weekend. It was edited and re-edited over almost a decade. Moreover, it was meticulously crafted and redacted.”

“But, that now-sacred scroll ... why, it travels all around the world now, George,” Kate said.

“Yeah, but it always winds up the same. Always someone trying to get someone to jump. Higher. Farther. Faster. Always battling with the averages. Hoping for a big win. Le Gran Prix.”

Monique couldn’t suppress her urge to know. Was that guy now screwing the pinay? Her mind got caught in a loop. And then in columns. Nothing was stacking up right. She could

see his eyes. And her eyes. She saw the whole scenario unfolding.

I knew that the granules had finally zapped her brain, too. Any line was fair game at this stage.

“How many times did he lie in the lye, 32?”

“What a caustic gooffoon,” [sic] Monique tersely replied. *Gooffoon, that’s a money word. Score one for 32.*

“I’m sure his back was cauterized by now.”

“What?” Monique was having trouble staying on one train of thought.

“Hey, Monique, I’ll just give them some of the *Gold* novel.”

“You’re going to give the whole plot away for free?”

“No, just an excerpt. Just a little slice.”

“Ok, whatever, 33.”

“How about I give them this for nada: [nothing in Spanish] ‘He had his buddy’s flatbed pull it out the next day. Over the next few weeks, he melted the gold down, and had it recast into little ingots. He could slowly start to sell it, which he did. A jeweler in Wilmington didn’t ask too many questions, and gave him \$1000/ounce. He sold the jeweler one 5-pound bar every Monday morning. And, like clockwork, he left at 9:15



AM with a check for \$80,000. This went on for six weeks. Then one Monday morning in September, he noticed police cars parked in front of the jewelry store. He never went back. Too risky. The jeweler never called. One Monday, curiosity got the best of him. He called the store. A recording. What happened to him? He hung up. Fearing that they had his cell phone number ...' Well, what do ya think?"

"Ready to go back now?"

As we made our exit, some *ps* thought fragments came into my granulated mind: *psatori ... pso psuddenly pscintillating ... pso psuggestive ... pso psays psomeone psomewhere ... pso psoon ... pshutters ... psexual psecrets ... pshaded.*

#### 14. **Wrightsville Beached** (May 2013)

It all started out innocently enough one June day.

I think that it was back in the summer of 1985. Yeah, that was the year. (My long-term memory is a lot better than my short-term these days.)

We, my brother Joe and several friends from Charlotte, were renting a two-story house on Pine Street in east Wilmington's Winter Park neighborhood. The address was 5002. (Don't ask me why I remember such trivial things.) Yeah, I'm fairly sure that was the number. <ding> I am now certain that was it.

It was – and still is, I believe – a sturdy house on a sandy corner. It quickly became something of a flophouse for five white dudes, aged 17 to 23. Youthful partying and such. The last goof-off summer before everyone got serious about their *great* <cough> careers.

Well, anyway, once our other friends back in Charlotte got word that we had secured a party house near the beach, weekend arrivals were nonstop. I still remember an early morning when there were about twenty visitors passed-out throughout the house. Bodies were slumped over in recliners, on sofas, in sleeping bags on the floor, and even unconscious on the lower back roof. It looked like a deadly gas had been released. I think that was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend. The big blowout.

However, before that mega-bash, back in late June (Friday, June 21<sup>st</sup> to be exact), a couple of close friends came down, namely Frank (future Agent 107) and Slim (who never would

take an agent number; was always leery of randomly assigned numbers). Upon arrival, they almost immediately wanted to go to Wrightsville Beach to paddle around in the sound in their newly purchased inflatable boats. And, trust me, these were no Zodiacs.

I consented and we were soon on our way, going east on Oleander Drive as the gray-green smoke inside the cab went west. We crossed the two bridges with no delays to speak of (or type up). Traffic was still light.

We parked on North Lumina Avenue, near the intersection with Mallard Street. Our put-in was only thirty feet away. I made sure not to infringe on a driveway by even an inch, as aggressive towing was/is the norm at this upscale beach.

We quickly inflated the two cheap plastic boats on the sidewalk with foot pumps. Slim's boat was smaller, so I joined Frank in the inflation of the larger one. Eight minutes later, we were all set for sail (or paddle).

Slim got in the smaller one by himself. Frank and I shared the larger one. We started to paddle towards a marsh island in Little Lollipop Bay (yes, the real name). We could see cars going over the West Salisbury Street Bridge (US 74).

As we drew closer to the bridge, it seemed that some motorists were screaming at us. *Perhaps they got an early start on their vacation?* Well, such I thought.

And, oh, the wind on that morning. Let me tell you, it was like a gale out of the southwest, which put it right in our faces. Our air-filled vessels were rocking in the stiff breeze.

Frank then grabbed the binoculars. He spotted the target destination and corrected our course heading.

We paddled in earnest towards what looked to be a small beach on the south side of the marsh island. We would take a break there and chill out for a while.

Slim had packed a thermos bottle full of *Elixium*, as he called it. He wouldn't tell us what it was. He assured us it was an all-natural concoction of high quality. Well, we were young and ready for some high adventure.

We arrived safely and beached the vessels. The wind had grown so fierce that we had to sit on the boats to prevent them from flying away. I remember Slim joking about us never making it back. His dark brown hair was being ruffled by the wind, and his striped white-and-blue t-shirt looked like a flag (his skinny torso being the mast).

We passed the metallic jug around, taking a few gulps with each turn. It tasted like a mix of almonds, blackberry and mint with under-currants (punnery in motion), replete with a leathery finish. No, just jesting; it was more like steel wool. It did have a slightly emetic aftertaste. I wondered: *What in the world is this? How toxic is it?*

I looked at Slim. "Hey, you didn't just grind up 1,000 morning glory seeds and make tea with them, did you? I vomit on that stuff! Is this going to be another puke-a-thon?"

Slim replied in an assuring manner. "Relax, we're all going to be ok. It's not that or anything else you've ever had before, or even heard about."

Then Frank had a question for Slim. “Hey, how long before the effects start?” The bangs on both sides of his middle-parted hair were flapping like wings in the gusts.

“Usually between 45 and 50 minutes,” Slim scientifically replied.

“And then what happens?” I asked with some trepidation.

“Everything,” Slim nonchalantly said. *Oh, great. Focking [sic] great. What have I signed up for this time? How will this end? How many drownings?*

There was a Pizza Hut just on the other side of the bridge that caught Frank’s attention. What I feared he would say, he said.

“Hey guys, we’ve got time to paddle over to that Pizza Hut before we start zooming. Let’s get some food through our gullets before the cosmic onrush commences.”

“You’re kidding me!” I exclaimed. Frank was a known high-risk-taker.

Slim seemed unfazed by Frank’s idea. However, he had no intention of going in his boat. “Bring me back a Hawaiian pizza.” Slim then reached in his pocket. “Here’s the money, man. Keep the change as a delivery fee.”

And with that Frank was ready to disembark on the 375-yard transit. The wind had now died down a little.

Frank looked at Slim. “Are you sure that you will be ok here alone?” *Oh, so Frank plans on me going with him. I’m*

*already feeling disoriented. Their English words sound like a foreign language. Better try to keep my wits about me.*

“Go!” Slim shouted. “I’ll be perfectly fine. You guys will get there much faster with both of you paddling a single craft.”  
*Did he say ‘craft’?*

And with that, we, Frank and I, were off. The wind, fortunately, continued to lessen in intensity. The trek wasn’t too bad, actually. In fact, we were dockside in a mere fourteen minutes without notable incident.

We tied up our plastic floatie and went inside the restaurant. Frank ordered the pizzas to-go. While waiting, we went out on the sound-side deck. Our little rubber dingy was ok (still pier-tethered).

Then I looked over the bridge back towards our little marsh island beach. I could see Slim. He was lying down with a towel over his face.

“I wonder if he is already getting some altitude, Frank.”

“Who?”

“Slim. Look down there. See him?”

“Oh, yeah, I see him. Looks like he’s just chilling out before the launch.”

We walked back into the restaurant and picked up our pizzas. The aroma was like nothing that I had ever smelled before. At the dock, I noticed that my legs felt a little rubbery as we loaded the two pizzas into the boat. *Better watch my step. I feel like Plastic Man.*

We boarded the little rubber dingy. Then Frank untied our inflatable yacht-naught, [*sic*] and we began our return voyage.

“The trip back should be easier, Frank. The wind is at our back now.”

“Yeah, should be,” Frank said as he surveyed the sound.

“Hey, Frank, could I place you in a future short story?”

He gave me a puzzled look. “Since when did you become a writer?”

“Well, maybe at a later date. Just seeking advance permission.”

“Listen, let’s just focus on paddling for now. We can have nonsensical thoughts when we’re back on that beach. We don’t want to have a mishap out here.” *Agreed.*

Slim saw us coming and waved. All was going swimmingly, as we weren’t in the water, nor was the pizza. It was going to be a successful water delivery.

“Ahoy!” Frank shouted as he skidded the inflatable on the sand. We jumped out with the pizzas and handed them to Slim. *Ah, we made it back safely. That wasn’t so bad.*

“You guys made pretty good time,” Slim said. “Elapsed time: 37 minutes, 37 seconds.” *Exactly 37:37?*

“Anything noteworthy happen over here while we were gone?” I asked Slim.

"It's too fast for note-taking now," Slim said. *Wow! He's already zapped.*

We devoured the pizzas within twelve minutes while standing and chatting. Slim kept smiling. I could tell that he was already getting some mental elevation. It was evident from his crazy facial expression ... and maniacal laughter.

"Get ready for lift-off, boys!" Slim yelled. And then he let out a guttural guffaw. "You guys are in for it now. Our roller coaster car is getting ready to go over the apex. Buckle up! It's going to be a wild ride."

After Slim's words decayed, I noticed that the bridge seemed to be getting farther away. In fact, wherever I looked seemed to be getting farther away from our little beach.

"Uh, guys, I don't think I'm going anywhere by boat for a while," I said. I sat down on the sand. I felt a little dizzy.

Frank was just beginning to get zonked, too. He had this frozen smirk on his face as he looked at the turbulent sound. "Where are our boats?!" he suddenly asked.

We all looked around. Both boats had been blown into a tidal creek between our island and a larger marsh island to the west. The wind was blowing both of them farther away from our island. *Oh, crap! I knew things were going too smooth. Here's where the tragedy occurs.*

Slim ran and jumped into the water. He swam ferociously after the boats. He caught his boat about fifty feet from our beach. Luckily, a paddle was still in the oar rest. Slim got



himself situated in his boat, rounded up the paddles, and towed the other boat back to the beach rather impressively.

“Well done, mate!” I said to him. “Excellent craft rescue.”

Frank looked at Slim. “Hey, what’s that red stuff on your feet?”

“It’s my blood!” Slim said. He freaked out.

“Damn, you sliced your feet up pretty good, Slim,” I said while trying to gauge the true severity of the cuts.

Frank then looked in the water where Slim had walked back on the beach. “I see what cut you, Slim. You stepped on an oyster bed.”

“Those are razor sharp,” I added.

We looked back at the soles of Slim’s feet. (He was now sitting down in the sand with his feet up). They were a city map with the streets in blood-red ink. For a moment, unspoken panic.

“Looks like you’re going to need stitches, Slim,” I said like a TV-show doctor.

Slim now had a look of shock on his face. He never realized how bad he was cut.

“Everyone, just relax,” Frank said. “I have some super glue. They use it in emergency rooms.”

Frank then uncapped a little plastic bottle and pierced the top. He then glued Slim’s sole slices shut.

“Just continue to lie down with your feet up,” he told Slim.

It seemed to work. The bleeding stopped.

“Thanks, doc,” Slim said. His mind began to relax. “How much do I owe you?”

Frank chuckled. “Nichts. [German for nothing] Consider it a crisis averted.”

Then another sudden gust of wind, and I swear it looked like the whole western shore was being blown north with the swells, all undulating up the Intracoastal Waterway. Once again, everything that I focused on was moving farther away. A sailboat was 100 yards away. Now it was 200 yards away. Now it was ... *Where did it go?*

“Hey, Frank, are you getting any spatial distortions?”

“Extra-spatial, dude. This shit is keen.”

“See, I knew you guys would like it,” Slim said. “But, sit tight, the turbo phase is about to kick in.”

“A turbo phase, Slim?” I asked, wondering if I could take any more psychic voltage. “My mind is oscillating fast enough.”

“Oh, you’re gonna be speechless, guys.”

Frank lowered his dark shades and looked at Slim. “This won’t screw up my night, will it? I have a hot date at 8.” *He does?*

“Funny that you should use the word *screw*, Frank,” I said. “My vision is being torqued.”

“Oh, go torque your dorque,” [sic] Frank humorously interjected.

Now, not only was everything that I focused on moving farther away, it was also beginning to rotate. Actually, a better word would be *spiralize*. As the object that I focused on began to move away, it also began to do barrel rolls, leaving a tracer trail that looked like a spiral. Surprisingly, I didn't feel dizzy anymore. After a while, it slowed down. Finally it all came back to three guys on a tiny marsh island.

As the orange sun began to set, it all seemed to stop. No headache. No fatigue. Curiously, I felt somewhat refreshed.

Then I felt a wet sensation on my feet. They were in the water. High tide. I looked over to Slim to congratulate him on his amazing dynamic distancing serum. But, to my surprise, he was gone! And, so was Frank! The boats were gone, too! *Those dogs!* I thought almost aloud. *They've pranked me!*

I stood up on the damp sand and thought about what to do. It was dusk now. Soon it would be dark. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the bottom of Slim's boat through the marsh plants on the backside of the little island. His boat was upside down. Then I noticed that Frank's boat was upside down, too. *Are they hiding under their boats?*

Even decades later, neither of them would agree with this ending. When shown my story notes, Frank remarked: “This story lacks a sockdolager.” [Sockdolager is German for an exceptional person.]

But, it was him.

## 15. **His Name was Ted Maize** (February 2014)

They don't make them like that anymore. Or, did they ever?

I (Agent 33) met Agent 8X4 (not to be confused with Agent 32), more commonly known as Charlie, at the Peculiar Rabbit in Plasma-Wigwood (in inner east Charlotte) for an after-work drink. I had something to tell him. Something that I felt that he could decipher, or at least, categorize.

We were able to get a small table on the third-floor rooftop terrace along the Pecan Avenue side railing, which offered an incredible view of the Charlotte skyline on this unusually cool early June evening. The sun was just starting to dip into the Duke Energy Building's top handle. We ordered a couple of Guinness drafts from the tattooed hipster-esque waitress. The scene was Chamber of Commerce postcard-perfect.

Charlie then led off the conversation with a direct question.

"So, what did you want to tell me, Agent 33?"

"Charlie, I had a dream last night. A most unusual dream."

"Did you wake up in a wet spot?" He started to laugh at his little zinger.

"Ha-ha-ha. Very funny. No, it was nothing like that."

"Let me guess ... I was in the dream, pumping your wife with wild abandon, while you watched in jaw-dropping amazement."

"No, wrong again, sport. I hate to break it to you, but you weren't in the dream."

“Not even a cameo?”

“Nope.”

Our waitress returned with our beers. Charlie winked at her, but she pretended not to notice. I thanked her and she meandered over to another table behind us.

“Well, who was in your epic dream, 33?” *Epik with a k?*

“Someone whom I have never met.”

“Someone whom you have never met? Quoi le [‘What the’ in French] fuque! [*sic*] Pardon my faux Français.” [fake French]

“Pardon granted, Agent 8X4.” I waved my right hand past Charlie’s shoulders, like a priest administering last rites. Then I rejoined his question. “Well, I’m pretty sure that I have never met him. He told me – in the dream – that his name was Ted Maize. He even spelled his last name for me, harping on the *i*. Yes, I remember writing it down on a form in my office.”

“Ok, do you remember how it started?”

“I sure do. Ted walked into my office one afternoon at the community college. He was a very neatly dressed white guy with black hair in a dark suit with a narrow tie. Age-wise, he was probably in his early 20s. Maybe about five-foot-ten in height. He told me that he was taking an international business class, and that he needed to spend at least six hours over the course of the semester talking with a college administration employee.”

“And, he just picked you out of the blue?”

“Yeah, it would have seemed like that.”

“And, let me guess, you agreed to it?”

“Yep. I can remember feeling hesitant to accept initially. I didn’t want to have more of my time taken away for something that seemed less than thrilling, to put it mildly. But then, I just said, ‘Ok, sure,’ in this strange dream.”

“Ok, then what happens? Does he turn out to be an anti-big-bank hacker?”

“No, nothing like that.” I then swatted at a gnat circling my beer glass.

“Did you get it?”

“The gnat? Who knows?”

“That gnat would most certainly know.” Charlie chuckled.  
“Ok, back to your weird dream, 33.”

“Well, we started having Friday lunches together in uptown Charlotte. He would ask me questions about ethics, morals, successful communication, sustainable growth, brand recognition, promotions, project collaboration, client retention, customer service, and all the other usual business world stuff. He really wanted to be a corporate success. He was driven. He wanted an office in one of those skyscrapers out there.”

“Ew, yuck! How could you stand him?”

“I could stand him, Charlie, because he was totally genuine. He wanted to do it the right way. No cutting corners. No

stepping on people. No cheating. No crooked techniques. No below-board strategies. He had this sincerely positive attitude. Believe me, Charlie; I was very skeptical of him at first. I kept thinking that this 20-something must have just attended some motivational seminar uptown, and was still riding that pumped-up, ultra-positive, the-world-is-my-oyster high. I initially thought he was just buzzing on an endorphin rush.”

Charlie ran his fingers through his salt-and-pepper beard. “But, if it was just that – a motivational-seminar high – it would have worn off by the second lunch. Those motivational speeches typically have a shelf-life of less than three days.”

“Yeah, I know, Charlie. But, Ted never wavered. He always had the same upstanding demeanor and wholesome aspirational outlook. From beginning to end.”

“Are you sure that you weren’t being punked in your dream by Ernie?” Charlie let out a guffaw. Nearby diners looked at us.

“You know, I can remember thinking that exact thing in the dream. I know that Ernie’s got agents working on all kinds of neural-transmission devices. I did wonder if it was a setup. There was a lucid phase when I really doubted Ted’s sincerity. But with every passing Friday lunch, it was more and more evident that he was the real deal.”

“Where was he from? Did he tell you in the dream? Was he a Charlotte native?”

“He had this slight mid-Appalachian-sounding accent, so I asked him where he was originally from. He told me that he grew up near Mortimer.”

“Mortimer? Where the hell is Mortimer?”

“It’s several miles down from the Blue Ridge Parkway, off of NC 90. It’s just a little township in the woods, really.”

Another waitress with long brown hair noticed that our glasses were nearing empty. “Two more dark ones, guys?”

“Sure,” Charlie quickly answered for both of us. *I guess I’ll be here for another forty minutes. Oh, well. Nothing on the docket tonight.*

I continued to recount the strange dream. “Ok, when Ted said Mortimer, I immediately recalled hiking in that area of the Pisgah National Forest in the mid-‘90s. I always thought it was pretty scary – the locals, that is.”

“A setting for a Deliverance remake?”

“Yeah, that kind of scary; though, it’s beautiful country, geophysically, and I imagine most of the people there are fine. But, if you’re alone out there when the sun starts to go down, even an inveterate atheist will pray like a moonshined preacher for their engine to start when they turn that ignition key.”

Our waitress returned and placed two more glasses of Guinness draft beer down, retrieved the empty glasses, and then gave me a cautious look, rolling her eyes towards



Charlie (who did not see this), as if to ask 'is he ok?' I just nodded. She promptly split, disappearing down the stairway.

"I heard that, man." Charlie laughed for a couple of seconds. "Hey, I bet this Ted character has handled the serpent." He laughed again.

"Ironic that you should mention that, Charlie. I always tried to steer our lunch conversations away from religion and politics in the dream, because I truly feared where they might go. I didn't want to end up in Awkwardville with that penguin. I really wanted to keep it on business topics only. However, on the sixth lunch – I believe it was the sixth one – we saw this apparently demented homeless man on the Square (the center of Charlotte) with a cross on his shoulders, spewing off verses from the Bible. Many were misquotes. I believe he was even interjecting whatever came into his mind. Well, Ted just looked at me and said, 'I can't laugh; I once kissed a rattlesnake.' And then as we walked down South Tryon Street a few blocks, there were about a dozen people protesting in front of the Duke Energy Building. He looked at me and said something about the responsible company must never ignore unfavorable comments, reviews or opinions. He went on to say, 'they need to dig to the root cause and fix it if need be' and then he said 'the corporation must maintain a truly stellar image and reputation, not just a fake PR veneer.' It wasn't exactly what I was expecting him to say. I remember at this point in the dream, really starting to wonder why I was having such a dream."

"Well, this Ted guy sounds like presidential material."

“Yeah, really. I know. But, I don’t think Ted Maize would ever make it in the world of politics, Charlie, because he had zero tolerance for manipulation or deception, much less corruption.”

“But, wouldn’t the ruthless corporate world just spit him out the other end? His approach seems way too naïve to succeed.”

“I wondered this, too, Charlie. But, after every lunch I found myself thinking that he was probably smart enough to negotiate the minefield of office politics. I could see his managers being afraid to fire him, for fear of an expensive lawsuit, or loss of their own jobs. I could see him quickly being über-connected and highly networked.”

“Your Ted guy almost sounds like an alien in human form. In your dream, did you ever wonder if he was really from some other planet, or controlled by some programmer? Did you ever notice a compartment door behind his neck or wires sliding out of his sleeves?” Charlie chuckled aimlessly. He was obviously inebriated now. *He probably started drinking long before he got here.*

I chuckled, too. “No, I never noticed any wires, doors, diodes, chips or transistors. I never doubted him being human. Well, maybe for a few seconds every now and then. But, man, he sure was polished for his age. And you know me, Charlie; I’m pretty skeptical of these types after being burned in *can’t-lose* MLM deals. But, I could never find a chink in his thin-lapelled rayon armor.”

“What about his personal life? Did he date his cousin?” Did that ever come up in your dream? I bet that would explain a lot about his character.”

“It did come up on the second lunch. He said that he was engaged to a sweet girl from Gastonia. In the dream, he showed me her picture. Blonde hair. Thin. Cute. About his age. He said that she worked at a beauty parlor off of US 321 near I-85. He said that they met at Gaston College.”

“Well, nothing unusual there.”

We then heard some chairs moving behind us. Our waitress was back in our area, trying to set down several plates of food. When she had successfully served the table of six, she asked us if we needed another beer. Charlie agreed to have one more, but I passed and opted for ice water.

“No more suds, 33?”

“No. Time to wind it down. My luck I would hit a roadblock on Commonwealth. A DWI for just 0.08 would truly suck.”

“I agree. I’m on foot tonight. Our girl is really working hard now.” Charlie now had a constant toothy smile.

“Yeah, waiting tables is tough work. I don’t think I could do it, Charlie.”

“Me, either.”

Our waitress soon returned with a foaming-over Guinness draft and an ice water. We thanked her. Then Charlie had something to ask her.

“You don’t know a Ted Maize, do you?”

“No, I can’t say that I do. Sorry.” She wasn’t the least bit startled by Charlie’s impromptu question.

“No problem. Just checking.”

She gave Charlie a curious look, smiled, and departed for the next table.

“That was bold,” I said, somewhat shocked by his question to our waitress.

“Listen, I had to make sure that you weren’t setting me up, 33. I’ve heard about your mind games. All of the agents have.” *They have?*

“Setting you up? I think you lost me there, bud.” I chortled.

“Ok, so how does this Ted dream end? Do you both get run over by a CATS bus with faulty brakes on Fourth Street?”

“Third Street.”

“Really?”

“No, there was no gory, mangled-body ending, Charlie. No Hollywood explosions. No heroic end-of-saga music.”

“Wait, I think I’ve got it figured out: Your wife, Agent 32, placed a chip behind your right ear while you were asleep as part of a research project. Am I right?”

“How did you know?!”

“Really? That’s it? I guessed it?”

“Hell, no! Give me a freaking break. You’ve lost your last marble.”

“Ok, ok, ok. So, how does this Ted Maize dream end?”

“Can you be serious for a minute? Or, are you too sauced?”

“I’m mouth-shut and ears-wide-open, pal. Finish your yarn. Stitch it up, Agent 33.”

“Ok, after our final lunch, Ted and I just diplomatically shook hands and wished each other well. We exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers, and promised to stay in touch. But, apparently, we didn’t. Then, ten years later, I’m in my office at the community college, sifting through the morning e-mails when my desk phone rings. The caller ID screen reads: TED MAIZE. At first I am incredulous. Then I reach for the handset with my right hand. That moment ... why, it had such a real feeling. I can still see my right hand going towards the phone in slow motion. I grab the cold plastic handset and place it up to my right ear. Three seconds slowly pass. I am mute; I can’t speak; however, the caller can. The male voice then says: ‘Hello, it’s me – Ted. Agent 33, you are never going to believe this ...’ Then, a pause.”

“Wow! And then what?”

“And then I awoke with the phone in my hand.”

“Check, please.”

## 16. A Tour to the Tower (March 2014)

I had been to Blowing Rock (NC) dozens of times, but I had never done the Flat Top Mountain hike in the Moses Cone Memorial Park. After doing some research online, I saw that there was an accessible fire tower atop this mountain. Now, I really wanted to go up there, and very soon. It looked very amenable to a psecret psociety pshort pstory. [*sic*]

Once we were finally hiking up there, I wondered what story fragments we would stumble upon. I was certain that some premium thoughts would be evoked on this hike. I knew a tale was hanging on a cliff ledge.

When the desk calendar showed an open March Sunday and Monday, we (Monique, Agent 32, and I, Agent 33) decided to head northwest out of Charlotte in our old Plymouth Voyager van, dubbed *The Green Utot* (Utot is Tagalog for fart), and give it a whirl.

It started as a foggy drizzle in the piedmont. As we climbed the Blue Ridge escarpment on US 321 North, the weather changed to a sleety rain, and the temperature dropped from 47° F in central Lenoir to 35° F at Blackberry Road.

“Wow! The temperature dropped 12 degrees in just 16 miles, Monique. Some major orographic cooling.”

“Orographic cooling? You’re such a geo-nerdo, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] I take it that you have the DAR (Digital Audio Recorder) on.” *Why, of course.*

I nodded. Monique just rolled her eyes and sighed.

The LED trip odometer hit 100 miles right as we rolled past the *WELCOME TO BLOWING ROCK* sign. It was only noon. Check-in time at our motel was 2 PM. Thus, we had some kernels of time to mill.

We kept going north on US 321 and stopped with the rain and sleet in Boone. *How nice of the precip [sic] to move eastward.*

We needed some sundry supplies, so we pulled into the Super Walmart. Agent 551's memo came to mind: *Do these spandex shorts give me moose knuckles? Ah, it doesn't matter; we're just going to Walmart, anyway.*

Then Monique looked at me. "Need to hit the kapper krapper, [sic] Parkaar?"

"No, I think I'm ok for now, 32. I can wait for the motel."

I began to wonder as I looked at the low clouds ripping by. *Kapper krapper? Spelled with k's, I'm sure. Is Agent 563 feeding me her lines via a cell phone? Maybe I'm just a wee brillig. Brillig from the troves of joves and stoves and groves, or whatever Agent 517 said on the psecret psociety Facebook page. Who died and made him Lord of the Shit Stools? That is a quote from Agent 504. Why am I rethinking such scat?*

"Icy, I see," I said as we exited the van and began a long trek across the crunchy parking lot. "Watch your step, Monique."

"Will do with these new shoes, 33."

We entered the mega-store. After wandering around aimlessly for about ten minutes, we found what we needed. Once in the checkout line, I noticed an interesting tabloid headline: 'Are You Running For God?' I did a double-take. *Wow! Agent 564 posted that. Does she work for this publication?*

The cashier was a white female college student. She asked us where we were from. Agent 54's memo came to mind.

"Well, we're not singing *Arrivaderci, Roma*," I said, hoping I pronounced the Italian words sufficiently.

"Ah, so you guys are from Charlotte?" *What?*

"Uh, yeah," I said. *How did she know?*

"That's un-canned and wacky!" Monique exclaimed.

I slowly handed the cashier the cash, but my neural circuits were accelerating the thoughts. *Wow, Monique just said Agent 400's word! My brain is entangled in a myriad of agential [sic] stimuli. Myriad, why, that's Agent 142's word! Stop this machine! Let me out of this tunnel of magnificently magnified words. Oh, no; that's Agent 441's phrase. I'm trapped. Mind-doomed in a mined tomb. And, that's Agent 288's terminology. Stop this circular circus!*

We left the store without an arresting incident, and were soon in our motel room (no. 11) at Alpine Village Inn. We started canoodling, just as Agent 1 had suggested.



The travel stress abated. Flip. Keep. Switch. Mr. Cunnilingus had arrived right on the spot, as Agent 544 had forecast.

“Monique, what is a lick of sense?” I wily asked.

“Not sure, Parkaar, but you can surely taste it.”

“Backwash,” I shouted. Agent 509’s word jumped right out of my mouth.

“What did you say, 33?!” *Silly boy.*

“Oh, it’s not important now, or even later. But, it’s time to eat food, Monique.”

“Yes, I’m hungry,” she said while getting redressed.

Soon we were at Mi Caretta (My Cart in Spanish) Mexican Restaurant after an elevated sidewalk stroll down Main Street. The Mexican-appearing hostess seated us. Soon another sister-to-the-hostess-appearing-waitress took our order. All was moving at a tranquil 2.3 knots per hour. Loose languid knots lazily lingering.

The food arrived 11:11 later. Well, maybe not exactly 671 seconds later. *11:11 would look interesting in print.* Such I thought as I looked at the four-tined fork.

The south-of-the-lower-48 food was in a commonly used Spanish word: *delicioso*. Monique devoured the Texas fajitas. I tried to be Mr. Healthy and had a vegetarian side sampler.

And, par for the curse, [*sic*] we left copies of previous short stories – just like the one you are reading now – in the bathrooms, in the wine list, and in the bill holder. *Must keep spreading this literary virus.*

The night at the inn was largely uneventful, except for a rumbling sound at 3:03 AM.

“What is that noise?” Monique asked.

“It’s not my stomach this time,” I replied.

“Well, it sure is not mellifluous to my ears.” *What?*

“Hey, did Agent 50 text you that word, Agent 32?”

“What in the world are you talking about?” *He needs to go back to sleep. Always crazier-than-normal talk when he wakes up in the middle of the night.*

The noise suddenly ceased and we drifted back into a confused sleep. Our dreams started, but then stopped before any conclusion could be drawn. Or, even traced.

At 8:08 AM, we rolled into a prime parking space at Cone Manor (Blue Ridge Parkway milepost 294). It was a balmy 24° F (- 4.44° C) as we walked past Moses Cone’s mansion.

“Ready for a frosty 5.6-mile hike, Monique?”

“The tower is that far away?” *Over eleven miles of hiking?!*

“No, that’s the roundtrip distance.” *Thank God!*

“Ok, I guess I can do 2.8 miles before taking a break, 33.”

“Oh, we can take breaks, Agent 32. This isn’t army boot camp.” Yey.

We walked past the carriage house and then passed through a narrow tunnel under the Parkway. The trail was actually wide enough, gently-sloped enough, and smooth enough for a car. It was an easy walk on the very fine gravel. *So far, so good. Piece o’ frozen cake.*

We passed a man and his son and exchanged friendly greetings. They looked a little tired, but were still moving ok.

Soon we were at the Cone Grave. It was one large headstone with two much smaller adjacent ones. The graves were surrounded by a green wrought iron fence with a locked gate. *Why is this locked up?*

“I wonder why we can’t go in there, 33.”

“They don’t want anyone to steal the flowers, Monique.”

“But, there are no flowers, Parkaar!”

“Now, did you take them, 32? If you did, I won’t tell anyone; your absconsion [*sic*] is safe with me.” *Absconsion?*

“Listen, I know that you’re just saying bizarre things because you have that damn audio recorder going.”

“Well, yeah; that’s my thing.” *His thing? Oh, joy!*

We recommenced our hike and soon arrived at a vast meadow. In fact, it looked like an alpine meadow.

This is an acme sledding hill, Monique.” *Acme?*

“Acme? What does that mean?”

“The best, the high point. Look how long this run is. And, the slope is not too steep, nor too slight. It has no rocks, barbed-wire fences, roads, or creeks in the way. And, it ends with a gentle upslope to bring the sled to a safe stop. It would be a regal sled run.”

“You are almost 50! You are too old for sledding, Agent 33. Give it up.” *She’s probably right.*

We then noticed some shortcuts that traversed the white dormant grass field like dark brown magic-marker lines.

“Should we take that goat path, Agent 32?”

“How do you know that a goat made that path?”

“Oh, it’s just slang for a shortcut across a field or lawn. I remember hearing it at UNCC.” [University of North Carolina at Charlotte]

“Well, the sign said to stay off the shortcuts, 33.”

“Ok, let’s abide by the signage and get in the total distance for full credit.”

“Why do people want to take shortcuts on a hike? Isn’t the point to burn as many calories as possible while taking in all the sights along the trail?”

“Good point, 32. Maybe some faster hikers use it as a passing lane.”

Just then, a lone middle-age Caucasian woman with an ASU (Appalachian State University) sweatshirt passed us. She was hiking at a brisk pace.

“Did you see that gun on her belt?” Monique asked. *Gun?*

“No, I missed that detail, 32.”

“You are probably the most unobservant agent, Parkaar. So lost in your obliviousity, [*sic*] you are.” *I like that word.*

“Now, that’s a keeper, Monique. I’ll be importing that word. I’ll elevate it to the top rung, where it will be duly dried and hung.” *Hung dung.*

After a series of a dozen switchbacks under leafless, hoary-barked trees, we arrived at the 44-foot metal tower. We carefully climbed up a few levels. The wind howled through the structure. The gray metal was ice-cold.

Blowing Rock could easily be seen in the valley below. It was a sunny, clear, crisp day now. We could see the snow on the northern ski runs of Sugar Mountain. We could also see the manmade ridgeline eyesore: Sugar Top (a high-rise hotel).

“Hey, want to go up farther, Monique?”

“No, I think that I already have vertigo, 33.”

We descended. Very carefully. Step by step. *Must not have a medical mishap up here. It could take several hours for the paramedics to get here.*

I then noticed a bit of scratched-on graffiti on the lowest section: *A TOWERING LIABILITY*

I took the last step down to terra firma and began thinking about that graffiti. *Most likely scratched by a safety guy or gal. Why, for sure.*

We had a carbo-lunch on a lightning-struck fallen tree next to the tower. It was still a little chilly, but at least there were no summer insects. The wind whispered syllables in some foreign language. *Feuillese? [made-up word]*

On the way down, we passed a young, sprightly Asian couple going up.

“Well, those were the fifth and sixth persons that we’ve encountered, 32.”

“No, 33, they were six and seven. Remember the man with the dog?”

“How did you know that that was the person I forgot to count?”

“I know you better than you know you.”

Now, a brief aside: We never saw the blue concrete lizard. However, we did hear some commotion up ahead when we

got back to the large alpine meadow. These sounds alternated between animalistic and human.

Monique turned left and started down the longer shortcut across the wide, horseless pasture. We didn't talk until we reached the carriage house.

I left a similar short story in the men's restroom. As I walked out, a hiker walked in. *Enjoy the free krupper kaper. [sic]*

## 17. **Caught Wild in Cotswold** (April 2014)

It was a mild early spring Saturday morning when I approached Agent 32 (code name: Monique) with an actionable question. She seemed to anticipate it.

“Monique, how would you like to bike it to Panera Bread in Cotswold?”

“How far away is that, Parkaar?” [my ailing alias] she asked, knowing my penchant for long bike rides.

“Not that far. Just a shade over six miles, one way,” I replied, hoping that she would consent to a pedaling adventure.

“Sure! I’ll pedal a dozen miles for that tasty broccoli cheddar soup.” *Excellent. I really want to ride my bike today.*

We got our cycling stuff packed and loaded drink bottles on the bikes. We were soon rolling out of the northeast quadrant of the large Windsor Park neighborhood in east Charlotte. *This low-50s-Fahrenheit weather sure feels great. It’s perfect morning weather for bicycling.*

Eight minutes later, we were at the Central Avenue intersection, waiting out the red light on Rosehaven Drive. I looked over at the crosswalk sign, and then at Monique.

“Six, five, four; get ready to go, mahal.” [love in Tagalog]



Monique nodded. "Ok, 33."

The light turned green and we pedaled safely across Central. We stayed on Rosehaven until it came to a T-intersection. *So far, so good.*

We then made a left on Winterfield Place. Then a quick right on Driftwood Drive at the 4-way stop. We crossed Edwards Branch. (A previous short story, *Legend Has It That - The Edwards Branch Tunnel Legend*, takes place on this creek about a mile downstream.)

Then we began to climb the hill. Next, we made a right on Campbell Drive, followed by a left on Greenbrook Drive, and a right on Briarfield Drive. We took a water break at the first speed hump.

"How do you feel, Monique?"

"Feeling great, Parkaar."

"Excellent, 32. We're already about halfway there."

We recommenced our two-wheeled journey. At the 3-way stop, we made a soft right onto Pierson Drive. After a big descent and a steep rise, we were passing under the Independence Expressway (US 74).

The new Super Walmart emerged on the other side of the overpass with the glistening Charlotte skyline behind it, about five miles to the west. *Man, this burg sure has grown over the past four decades.*

We stopped on the old metal footbridge that spanned an unnamed tributary and took another drink break. I began to clear some of the untrimmed vines that went from railing to railing, blocking our transit.

“Well, Monique, we’re a little past the halfway mark now.”

“How far past it?” she asked.

“Oh, we’re probably 3% past it.”

“So, we’re exactly 53% of the way there.”

“Yes, that would be my final answer.”

“Sorry, that wasn’t the big-money question, Parkaar.”

“The story of my life, 32.”

After guzzling down several fluid ounces of some energy concoction, we began walking our bikes up a steep, muddy, leaf-covered trail in the woods to the very short segment of Pierson Drive. We walked up to Seifert Circle, saddled up,

and continued our ride. *This sure is great exercise. / What a workout! What do we do next? Swing from vines?*

As we rolled onto Chippendale Road, I noticed an old, stone-and-mortar-housed, shrub-shrouded, granite sign that read: Amity Gardens 1936. *Wow. 1936. That was put up before World War 2.*

Soon we were crossing Monroe Road on Richland Drive in Oakhurst. We bounced over some railroad tracks. My bike's steerer tube almost snapped. The headset lock nut had worked its way loose again. *Those threads must be stripped. Need to fix it when we get back home. Maybe put some chewed gum in there.*

At the stop sign, we turned right onto Craig Avenue. Traffic was light. Less than a half-mile later, we turned left onto McAlway Road and had to deal with a few cars, but nothing too hairy. *This is going pretty good. Monique doesn't seem too fatigued.*

A couple of stop signs later and we were on Walker Road. We turned right onto Bertonley Avenue. Then we took a right onto Faulkner Place for a block, followed by a left back onto McAlway. Finally, a left onto Woodlark Lane got us to Randolph Road.

"Well, once we cross this street, we're essentially there, Monique."

“Let’s not get run over just before the goal line, 33.”

“Yes, let’s not.”

We waited a minute for a gap in the traffic. Then we dashed across the four lanes and rode the sidewalk up to the renovated Cotswold Shopping Center. *Ah, we made it.*

We rode past Harris-Teeter to Panera Bread, which had taken over a failed restaurant’s space in the courtyard area.

We locked the bikes in front, went in, ordered, paid, and took a seat outside at a round, black, metal table that had a reeled-in parasol. I cranked it open for shade. The day was quickly warming. It was a cool 53° F when we left the house; now it felt like 83° F from all of the heart-pumping exertion.

Our soups arrived six minutes later. The 20-something Caucasian waiter - you guessed it - looked like a hipster. He was ogling the nearby olive-skinned waitress with an earnest eagle’s eye.

“Looks like our boy is after some tail, Agent 32.”

“You think they’re pumping, Parkaar?”

“I think he is still in the size-up phase, Monique.”

“How long will it take him to enter the approach-and-ask phase?”

“I don’t think we have that much time, 32. Better eat up before your soup gets cold.”

“I don’t like it as hot as you do, 33.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Your French onion soup does look delicious, though. Who invented such a strange soup with croutons and cheese floating on top? And, don’t say, ‘Oh, some Frenchman,’ Parkaar.”

“Maybe a Frenchwoman?” *Hmmm ... Frenchman is one word. I wonder if Frenchwoman is two words. That would be strange and sexist.*

I finished my cheesy soup and started chewing on the baguette slice, as Monique ended her word thoughts and started on her creamy soup. It wasn’t Paris, but it wasn’t Krapperville, either. And the language barrier was so much lower here.

“Sure is a nice April day, Monique, and it’s even better because you are here.”

“Why, salamat, [thank you in Tagalog and Cebuano] my dearest Parkaar. Mahal kita!” [I love you in Tagalog]

But, before we could get all googly goo-goo, a whiter-than-thou couple in their 60s took a seat next to us. Their attire could best be described as G-S; i.e., Golf-Safari. I made sure my audio recorder was on, and then pointed it at them under our table.

“I don’t know, darling; they may not have Texas fajitas here,” the older fellow said.

“Oh, I just want a small burrito, love,” the older lady pleaded. “Just one. I am utterly famished!”

I quickly realized that they were sitting in the wrong outdoor area. I caught the eye of the older gentleman and said: “I think you guys are looking for Salsarita’s. It’s just next door.”

“Oh?” The older man was surprised at their error.

“Yeah, it’s right over there.” I pointed to my left.

They got up and began to amble over to the adjacent Tex-Mex restaurant. As they passed our table, I couldn’t resist. I reached out with a short story – just like the one that you are reading right now – in my right hand.

“And, here’s something to read while you wait for your chow,” I cheerfully said to the older man. “Some good, free, financial advice.”

He took my short story and looked at me with a not-so-sure-about-this expression. And, soon they disappeared around the corner. *What did he just do? He’s feeling bold today.*

I returned my gaze to Monique, who was already staring at me. She looked stunned.

“Great performance there, 33. Bravo! But please, no encore. Not today.”

“Ok, you got my word. Hey, I just had this pictorial analogy in my mind, Agent 32.”

“Is it X-rated?” *What is she thinking?*

“No, it’s safe for this G-rated scene, Monique.”

“Well, please divulge the details. We both know that your digital audio recorder is running.” *She always knows.*

“Well, have you ever seen a cross-section of a telephone cable with all of those tiny, multicolored wires inside?”

“Yes, and ...”

“Well, 32, imagine a seemingly endless giant cable with seven billion wires inside.”

“Ok. Continue, 33.”

“However, unlike a telephone cable, some wires inside have different lengths and varying widths. Most are between seven and eight meters in length, but some are longer, up to twelve meters in rare instances. However, some are as short as one millimeter!”

“Eureka! I got it figured out: A meter equals ten years of a person’s life in your multi-stranded model. Am I correct?”

“Yep, you guessed it, Monique.”

“And, sadly, one millimeter equals a stillborn baby. Am I right again?”

“So right you are. You’re two for two.”

“And, let me guess again ... one millimeter of width equals a personal weight of 100 pounds.”

“Why, you are three for three! Swish, swish and swish. Nothing but net. Fishnet.”

“You are too much, Parkaar.”



“Think about it, Agent 32. The wires change in thickness over their length. And the cable itself is getting wider; it’s bulging due to the obesity epidemic. Now, will it explode?”

“I think that you have too much time on your strands, 33.”

“Score! Please play along, Monique.”

“And, if I don’t?”

“Who will? Don’t early-terminate a possible short story for someone’s time-to-fill train commute.” *Time to fill in his brain ... with cement.*

“Ok, 33; I’m still onboard. Go.”

“Look back to the very slender beginning of the cable, 32.”

“Is there a beginning?” *Hmmm, not sure.*

“Gouda won, Monique. Ultra-keen. Splendido in Escondido!”

“Have you ever even been to Escondido?”

“Knots for sure, but I bet Agent 49 has.”

“Shhh, quiet down. Here comes the waiter!”

Our waiter returned and asked us if we needed anything else. I politely told him that we were ok. He pushed a gray communications cable back into its track along the door frame, and then walked back inside.

“It’s all linked together, Agent 32. Ultimately, there are no non sequiturs.”

“You’ve already said that, Parkaar. You are starting to loop and lap. Look here.”

Monique handed me her tablet computer which was on the psecret psociety Facebook page. A previous short story – yep, you guessed it, just like the one you are reading now – was on the screen. I read my repeated phrase. <gulp> *I am slipping worse than a lithium-greased clutch.*

“We’re a long way from that grassy, goat-pathed meadow. [reference to *A Tour to The Tower*] Doncha think?” *Oh, dear.*

Monique just smiled and sighed. “Gosh, my dearest kano, [slang for American in Tagalog and Cebuano] you’re so silly, but I’ll take you over an always-serious type.”

Seven minutes later our waiter returned one final time. He glanced towards Monique, who was now checking her Facebook page.

“That Facebook sure is popular,” he said.

“It really is,” Monique replied. “I check mine several times an hour.”

“I tell ya, just about every device seems to be tuned to it here,” the waiter added.

I sensed an opening. I was going for it.

“Have you ever taken part in a recursive Facebook application?” I asked him.

The waiter looked at me with a fair degree of bemusement. “Recursive?”

“Yeah, kind of like word fractals. Repeating sub-themes. Meta-memes. Zany stuff like that.”

“Uh, no, can’t say that I have. Sounds kinda interesting, though.”

I quickly handed him a psecret psociety business card. He took it and put it in his black money belt.

“Thanks, I’ll check it out later,” he said as he walked over to a distant table. He never returned.

“Do you think that he will submit any words or lines for the next story, Parkaar?”

“He doesn’t realize it right now, but he already has.”

“Oh, I mean, via the psecret psociety page.”

“I’m never quite sure of who will participate, Agent 32; there is no accurate profile.”

Soon we were off on our bicycles again, making the return trip to east Charlotte.

Walking our bikes down the muddy slope between the Pierson Drive segments was much trickier in descent mode. A red-clay slip-n-slide. *Wow. Must remember to bring a long saw next time to cut and clear this giant-azz [sic] fallen tree. The City seems to have no interest in removing it. Maybe they really don’t want bikes traversing this almost-abandoned public right of way.*

## 18. **That Old Ball Game** (April 2014)

Charlotte had just opened a brand-new downtown minor league baseball stadium a couple of weeks prior to the rain-now-gone evening that found Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) staring at a yellower than a canary left-field foul pole. We had just consumed some standard ball-park fare in the standing-room-only area, and were now seated as the Durham Bulls came up to bat in the top of the third. The game was still scoreless.

Monique was now taking in the surroundings. She was noticing the tall buildings behind right and center fields. She then commenced the conversation at BB&T Ballpark.

“The city skyline certainly is an impressive backdrop, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] They really thought this out.”

“Yeah, the design is excellent. I’m glad that they placed home plate in the southwest corner of the stadium. That way the infernal late afternoon sun is blocked, unless you sit in the outfield bleachers.”

“Hey, let me take your picture!”

“Only if I can take yours.”

“Sure!”

We snapped some obligatory photos as the Bulls started putting some men on base. *Need a double-play ball.*

Monique was disappointed when she couldn't make a wireless connection to Facebook to upload the new pics.

"Does this place have free wireless, Agent 33?"

"Hmmm ... I'm not sure, 32." *I bet that he is already recording.*

The next thing you know, we hear that unmistakable sound: the crack of a well-swung wooden bat solidly connecting with a cowhide-covered, three-inch-wide, red-seamed, white ball. And boy was that white ball sailing into the darkening evening sky. Heck, it was headed right for us!

"Heads-up, Monique!"

"What? Where is it?"

Monique had no idea where the baseball was, or where it was going. And, before I could answer her questions, the ball moved back into fair territory, soared over the left-field-corner wall, and bounced off the picnic area canopy. It then hopped and bounded into West 4<sup>th</sup> Street. *What a blast! He sure got all of that one.*

"Wow! That was some home run there, Monique. An epik [sic] with a k blast."

Monique followed the ball as it rolled down the sidewalk. "Yeah, it really was, Parkaar. What a swing!"

“Too bad the wrong team hit it, Monique.”

“Can you hit it that far, 33?”

“In my dreams. In my fading youthful dreams.”

We both laughed as the Durham Bulls were finally retired. They now led 3-0.

“The Knights have got themselves into a bit of a hole, Monique.”

“But, there’s 72.22% of the game left to go, Parkaar.” *I think she may be correct. There are 18 half-innings in a standard baseball game. Five half-innings have been played so far. So, 13/18 equals ...*

“Good, quick math, 32.” *How did she calculate that so fast? She must have used her calculator on her cell phone.*

The teams tacked on a run each in the fourth, and then the game fell into a fifth-inning lull.

“You know, Monique, I think that this is the first professional baseball game that I’ve attended since seeing the San Francisco Giants play their archrivals, the Los Angeles Dodgers, in that old, soon-to-be-razed, windy-as-hell Candlestick Park.”

“And, when was that, Parkaar?”

“It was Wednesday afternoon, July 29, 1992 to be exact, lovely Agent 32.”

“No way! You’re making that up, Agent 33.” *How would he remember that exact date? Did he find gold out there on that day?*

“No, I’m for real, Monique; that was the date. I looked it up on one of those baseball almanac websites the other day. I remembered that the Grobster – remember him from our wedding? – came out to visit me in late July of ‘92. I can still remember the stadium conditions: sunny, windy, and as cool as a fog sandwich.” *What?*

“As cool as a fog sandwich? You’ve got that audio recorder going again. Yes, I can tell. It’s obvious.” *I guess fog sandwich was a little too surreal for normal conversation.*

“Oh? Maybe so.”

“Oh, I know so. But, please continue.”

“Well, the game-time temperature was 65° F, but it felt like 45. Rob was so amazed that an American city in the lower 48 could be so cool in late July. You know how hot Charlotte is in late July, Monique.”

“Oh, yes, darling. I’ve experienced two of them already. Even hotter than Manila!”



“Ok, I remember that the ‘stick [local slang for Candlestick Park] was only half-full. Back then the Giants were practically giving the tickets away. The team almost got relocated to Tampa Bay that year. I think both of us got in for only \$10. Crazy cheap. Not like the ever-sold-out and pricy AT&T Park of today.”

Monique just nodded. Then she began to eat the rest of her tucked-away pretzel.

Neither the Bulls, nor the Knights, scored in the fifth. The game lumbered into the sixth with Durham still up by three, 4 to 1.

Darkness had completely taken over now. Rectangles of light from the office, apartment and condo towers appeared sporadically in columns and in rows, but I’m not sure if a connect-four was ever scored.

*My mind meandered back to Candlestick Park. I wonder how many people who attended that game in '92 are still alive. Are any of them here tonight? Maybe a transferred BofA [Bank of America] employee? Were any famous people at that particular game? A now-famous Silicon Valley techie, perhaps? Anyone who later committed a horrific crime. A garotter? [sic] A multi-million-dollar lottery winner?*

Monique noticed that I had become lost in my thoughts. She shifted in her seat and placed her cute, tiny, perfectly bronzed, right hand on my left arm. “What are you thinking,

my dearest kano?" [kano, Filipino slang for an American man]

"Oh, just wondering who might have been at that particular NL [National League] West baseball game back in 1992." *Of all the things to think about.*

"Were you even at that game? Are you sure that you were really there?" *She's just trying to get a rise out of me.*

"Yes, I'm sure. My mind has not completely crumbled yet. Rob and I were really there. You can ask him the next time you see him."

"Ok, I believe you, 33. But, I don't get the cosmic significance of it."

"Me, either, Monique. But maybe the butterfly takes effect." *What did he just say?*

"Gosh, you can be so loko, [Filipino slang for crazy] my crafty dodoy. [a made-up Filipino-esque word] You lead us out into the middle of a God-forsaken desert of thought to find some buried golden notion, and then you stop and ask who has the map." *Wow! I like her description.*

"Excellent, 32. Yeah, something like that, asawa. [wife in Tagalog and Cebuano] Do keep going. Keep pumping our story along! Send it down the line. Heck, send it over the line. But, let's keep it in fair territory." *He's playing for the tiny microphone in his shirt pocket once again.*

“Why is everyone standing up, hon? And, what is that song that everyone is singing?”

“It’s the seventh-inning stretch, my love. It’s a ritual at every baseball game in the middle of the seventh inning. The song is *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. It’s a real oldie that hatched on Tin Pan Alley in New York City. They’ve been singing it for eons. Ok, for over a century. It was penned in 1908. It’s pure Americana.”

“It’s kind of corny, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess so now, 32.”

“Maybe it has always been, 33.”

“Maybe so. I guess they needed to have something to do. I think by the middle of the seventh inning, everyone needed to get their rumplers [sic] out of the hard seats.”

“Rumpler? I don’t think that’s an English word, Parkaar.”

“Well, it is now.” I laughed.

“Hey, wait, I think that’s my word. I used it before somewhere. Don’t be using my words, 33. Don’t swipe my lines.” Monique chuckled. *What is she writing? A story about me?*

“No, never, know never, and with a psilent [sic] k, w and p, oh, pso klever [sic] ...”

“Ok, that’s enough, 33. Cut it. Pause it. And, stop it.”

“Icy, I see.”

“You are intentionally using previous lines again. You really need to tone down your echo, Agent 32.” *When is the final echo?*

The Knights drew as close as a single run, thanks to a two-run shot to left-center. The score was now 4-3 in favor of Durham.

“We’re back in the game, Monique.”

“Are you running from myths or creating them?”

I did a double-take. Make that a triple. “Wow! That’s a great turn of phrase, Monique. I’ll be using that one for sure when I write up this wonderful night. Oh, I just remembered that it was the sixth inning when the Dodgers pounded out five runs on that late July day by the bay in ‘92. They would go on to win the game 6-1. San Francisco had won the prior two games of the three-game series. Both teams went absolutely nowhere that year; they both took turns scrubbing the cellar floor. I’m sure that Agents 35, 49, 307, and 344 would’ve liked that result.”

“Probably so. Those agents bleed Dodger blue, 33.”

“Yeah, no doubt.”

“So, it all comes back in bits and fragments, Parkaar?”

“Uh, more like sharp shards – sharp shards of broken glass.”

“Yikes!” Monique exclaimed.

“Relax, 32, these thoughts can’t cut you. Well, at least not from this angle.”

“Hey 33, let me take a quick, little, five-second video of you announcing the game.”

“What? I don’t know, Monique. I’ve got that nasty spider bite on my right cheek and I just feel old.”

“You’re not old!”

“I’ll be 50 – as in the big five-oh – in July.”

“So, what?”

“So, what? When I was 16, I didn’t even think that I would live to be 50. It seemed so very far off.”

“But, it’s not. Here you are, and still very active; still riding the bike to work.”

“Well, it aint 30. Let me tell ya. And all that ‘life begins at 50’ stuff is just a load of caca.” [Spanish for crap]

“You mean cacao?”

“Uh, I wish.”

I finally consented to Monique’s video request. She filmed me doing a five-second mock-announcer bit. (The video is posted on the psecret psociety Facebook page; if interested in viewing, scroll back to April 2014.)

A sudden northwest breeze brought a chill with it. I was wearing a Hawaiian shirt. Monique was smart enough to bring a leather jacket.

“Monique, I feel a little chilly and I think my butt has had it with this seat.”

“You want to go after the Knights are retired in the seventh?”

“Sure, whatever; that’s fine by me.” *I gots to gets out of here.*

The Knights failed to score in the bottom half of the inning. We got up and gathered our things and left via the Graham Street exit. *I wonder if the Knights will make a comeback. I’ll just check the 11 o’clock news later.*

We walked west on 4<sup>th</sup> Street towards our gravel parking lot.

“Did you enjoy the game, Agent 32?”

“I did. Very much. That’s a great stadium. Thanks for everything.”

“Sorry to cut it short. I mis-dressed. I thought that I could macho it out in short sleeves like I did at Candlestick. I guess I’ve lost my cool-stadium-air blood, my dear.”

“Well, we’re not singing *Arrivaderci, Roma.*” *What?! Which one did she pull that from?*

“Ah, now who is caught in Ernie’s enigmatic echo chamber?”

We both shared a chuckle as we passed by the Greyhound bus station and skipped under the railroad overpass.

“This is where the Gateway multimodal station will be built, Monique. Amtrak, Greyhound, the CATS Red Line train and the Gold Line streetcar will all converge here.”

“Wow! That will be so convenient!”

“No doubt. Someday soon we can take the Gold Line to Hornets games.”

We got in our van and drove back to the eastside of town. I would find out later (online) that the Knights would lose the game 8-4.

I continued to think about the LAD-SFG game at Candlestick Park on July 29, 1992. *How many MLB games have been*

*played? Hundreds of thousands? Though, probably less than a million.*

Yes, a seemingly insignificant major league baseball game on a July afternoon in 1992 had a hold on my mind. I remembered that some spectators were even snoozing in the stadium. A cheap place to take a safe catnap, I guess.

There were also a few reading short stories – just like the one that you are reading now – on folded pamphlets. Some were elevated by gusts. And some were blown away.



## 19. **Water Hammer** (May 2014)

I'll never forget the conversation that I conveniently and surreptitiously overheard – and, yes, recorded – at a now-defunct little, dingy, jaundice-yellow-paint-a-faded, hole-in-the-wooden-lapboard-wall-sided watering hole on Judah Street in the ever-foggy Outer Sunset district of San Francisco.

It was back in the early spring of 1992. It must have been about 7:00 PM when I sidled on in for a cold dark beer. Yeah, yeah, that was the name: Sidle on N. A clever play on words with the N standing for the N Muni streetcar line that ran past the front door – the olive-colored front door that no one ever cared (or dared?) to close.

I remember looking at that tilted small poster on the cracked wall. Some purple-costumed loon billing himself as Mysterieau of San Francisco. Ah, but that is another story. (*Mysterieau of San Francisco* is a novella by yours truly.)

Well, without further ado, here's the verbatim transcript from that micro-cassette. *Hmmm ... where is that PLAY button? Oh, there it is.* <click>

[the sound of a tram passing, clacking down the old, in-the-street, standard-gauge tracks]

Jim: “John, how do you think your court case will go? Are you going to win?”

[the sound of a glass being set down on a wooden table]

John: “I don't know, Jim; I don't want to jinx it, but I feel pretty good about it, I guess. At least my lawyer says not to worry.”

Jim: “Your lawyer says not to worry. Ha! Keep your hand on your wallet, sport.”

[Jim laughs for a few seconds]

John: “Yeah, I know, Jim; I should probably worry. Hey, speaking of lawyers, I’ve got to tell you about the most bizarre conversation that I have overheard in some time.”

Jim: “Ok, shoot. Let’s have it.”

John: “Well, I was down in the Lower Haight having lunch by myself in a tiny Chinese restaurant about two weeks ago.”

Jim: “Ok, sounds very believable so far. Continue.”

John: “And trust me, Jim; I wasn’t eavesdropping, but the joint is so small that you just can’t avoid overhearing conversations in there, especially if you’re eating alone.”

Jim: “Ok, I got the scene.”

[a waitress walks up to their table; the sound of stiletto high heels on a concrete slab floor]

Waitress: “Would you two gentlemen like another round?”

John: “Sure.”

Jim: “Yeah, thanks.”

[the sound of her high heels walking away]

John: “Ok, where was I?”

Jim: “On her ass.”

[Jim chuckles]

John: “Well, I wouldn’t pass that up. You know you wouldn’t, either, Jim. You’re a dog, too – just a slyer one than me.”

[Jim coughs and clears his throat]

Jim: "You were justifying your auditory snooping."

John: "Ok, well, there were about four conversations going on in there, but the one that won my mind's primary attention was the one just behind me. Apparently one of the guys had been screwed out of child custody by a family court lawyer."

Jim: "Ah, family court lawyers. Such lovely creatures. The predators of the hyper-emotional. The ghouls of the ghouls. Ok, I'm still following ya. What next?"

John: "Well, apparently he was really ticked-off by it. I mean REALLY ticked-off. So much so, in fact, that he had his buddy, a licensed plumber, take the lead in his revenge plot."

Jim: "A plumber? What did the plumber do? Did he whack the attorney in the head with a piece of galvanized pipe for \$500?"

John: "No, nothing so horribly and bluntly violent like that. Something insidiously ingenious. Something that Hollywood could make a movie around."

Jim: "Ok, I'm now waiting with freshly baited [*sic*] breath. Keep your story pumping. Don't let your pipe get clogged now."

John: "You're a real comedian today, Jim. Are you high again on something?"

Jim: "No, I'm as sober as ever, and I'm all ears. Please do continue. I'll restrain myself for the remainder of your tale. I promise."

John: "I doubt that, Jim, but I'll recommence anyway. Alright, the guy says that he had his plumber pal call the offending

lawyer at his Diamond Heights residence, and that he offered him a free promotional water hammer arrestor installation, just on the whim that he might be experiencing a water hammer issue in his home, and, well, you guessed it: He agreed to the installation.”

Jim: “Wait a second. Water hammer? What the hell is that?”

[the waitress returns and places two glasses (of beer, I presume) down on the table]

John: “Thanks.”

Jim: “Thanks, again.”

[the sound of the high-heeled waitress walking away]

John: “What is a water hammer? It’s that banging sound in the pipes that occurs in some houses and apartments after you turn the water faucet off.”

Jim: “Oh, yeah; I know what you’re talking about now. Ok, resume, master storyteller.”

John: “Well, next, the plumber gives the pissed-off-at-lawyer dude a new water hammer arrestor from his van.”

Jim: “Water hammer arrestor? Ok, let me guess ... it suppresses the pipe-banging noise.”

John: “Jim, you must have taken your smart pills today.”

[John laughs for a few seconds]

Jim: “But, is he going to install it himself? The lawyer would recognize him, right?”

John: “No, Jim, he gives it to him so that he can modify it. He takes it apart. Apparently there is a piston mechanism in it

and an air chamber. He places some water-soluble poison powder in the air chamber on the end. It becomes a time-released toxin-administering mechanism. The chemical that he inserted is called Thalene.” *[sic]*

Jim: “Thalene? You must mean thallium, John.”

John: “Yeah, that’s it.”

Jim: “That shit is nasty, John. They can’t even use that on rats or roaches anymore.”

[the sound of another N train passing]

John: “Well, slowly, over about six months the lawyer is poisoned to death. The autopsy leads them to believe that it was thallium, but they never find a source. They never find a single grain in the home. Not even a speck. Nothing. Über-clever, isn’t it?”

Jim: “Woah! Hold on. Wouldn’t others who drank the tap water in that home over those six months be poisoned, too?”

John: “No, not necessarily. I overheard them say that visiting guests would never get a dangerous amount in their system after a few visits. He was single and no one else lived with him. And, he had no pets. You would have had to have lived in that home with him to have died from it. He said that it slowly accumulates in the body. It’s more of a chronic exposure than an acute one.”

Jim: “Wow, we’ve got a great screenplay on our hands here, John. The next epic revenge thriller. I can write it up. We’ll be rolling in greenbacks! Hey, it didn’t really come to pass did it?”

John: "Well, I don't know, Jim. I haven't been reading the *Chronicle* or watching the local news as of late. I guess if we learn of a local lawyer's mysterious death in the last year, we should go to the cops."

[the sound of a wooden chair (mine) sliding on a concrete slab floor]

The audio tape ended and I turned the old cassette player off.

Then Monique (Agent 32) walked into the den. I looked up at her. *What a cute pinay [Philippine lady] she is.*

"I thought I heard some men talking. What was that, Parkaar?" [my ailing alias]

"Oh, just an old taped recording of a conversation in San Francisco from a couple of decades ago. I used to use these analog audio snippets in multimedia art back then."

"What in the world! Did those people know that they were being recorded?"

"Uh, I doubt it, 32."

"Are you recording me now?"

<click>

## 20. A Search for Sidle on N (May 2014)

So, there we, Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33), were on a seasonally cool August day in 2012, sauntering down Judah Street in extreme western San Francisco, descending towards the Pacific Ocean. Not that we could actually see the sea, as the marine fog curtain had already dropped by three in the afternoon. *Must log this fog.*

We had just got off the Muni N Judah streetcar at 40<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I felt almost certain that that little, now-defunct, jaundice-yellow-faded-paint-sided, olivine-colored-wooden-front-doored, break-in-the-lapboard-wall watering hole was somewhere in this area of the Outer Sunset district. *It has to be around here. It has to be!*

It was twenty years since I had stepped foot in there. Nothing looked like the little time-passer of a pub in the first block. We stopped at the intersection with 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue and waited for the crosswalk sign to turn white. *Now, where was it? Is my long-range memory sector already toast?*

“Well, maybe the next block is the one, Monique.” *He’s lost.*

“Ok, Parkaar, [my ailing alias] no problem. I’m enjoying the walk, though it is a little chilly for summer.”

“This town – or, more specifically, this side of town – has the best summer weather of anywhere in my book, princess. Well, Pacifica and Eureka may battle for a close second place.”

“Only you would say that, 33. You fog-loving freak.”

“That, I am. That, I am.” *Not the nonsense already.*

“Already repeating? It’s not even sundown, 33. Your mind’s clutch is totally shot now.” *She’s probably right.*

“Lotsa kewl [*sic*] fog and sun-shielding overcast skies with no rain. I call that parfait, [French for perfect] Monique.”

“Parfait, you say? I think I’ll take the dessert, instead.”

“Sure, we can do that later, too.” *Oh, boy.*

The crosswalk sign changed to WALK and we continued our very decent descent. I assiduously scanned the storefronts looking for a possible clue, just hoping to notice an architectural feature that would trigger a dormant memory. *It has probably been repainted by now. Heck, it needed a paint job three decades ago.*

Alas, we arrived at 42<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. Then, from out of the fog, a yellow Toyota sedan came whizzing up to the intersection. We were already mid-crosswalk, and I wasn’t sure if it was going to yield to us.

“Hurry, Monique!” I shouted.

We both made it safely, as the car skidded to a stop on the first wide yellow crosswalk line. It then sped off across Judah.



“I thought that you said this town was pedestrian-friendly, Agent 33.” Monique was a little shaken.

“Oh, he must be a former Charlottean.” I chuckled to myself. “Or, maybe from Miami,” I added. “He’s probably cranked-up on meth or crack rock.”

“Or, maybe his girlfriend just dumped him, [used in the novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco*] Parkaar.”

“Yeah, maybe so. Either way, he’s driving like a certified douchebag.”

“I agree, 33. I just wish that the cops saw his bad driving.”

“He’s in a rush to get nowhere, and rapidly succeeding.”

“I thought the saying was, ‘in a rush to get knowhere, [sic] and arriving ahead of pschedule’, [sic] Parkaar.”

“If you used a silent k and a silent p, that would be above his mental grade.” *What is he on about now?*

Monique gave me an odd look as our walk recommenced. *This already feels like a strange day. I’m sure he’ll write it up later.*

I kept looking and looking for some façade familiarity. However, there were no businesses – nothing but residences. *Where did it go? Where was it?*

We crossed 43<sup>rd</sup> Avenue without incident. Still nothing. *Where the hell is that place? Monique must think I'm bonkers. / Has he lost his mind? What are we searching for?*

We walked past a Presbyterian church and stopped at an adjacent vacant lot. *I wonder if this is where it was.*

"Was it here, Parkaar?"

"Possibly, 32. Possibly."

"Maybe they razed it, 33."

"Yeah, maybe. That actually sounds believable. And, it's starting to look like the case."

We walked to the next edifice, a gray building with boutique retail on the first level and two stories of apartments on top. I stopped and studied the building.

Monique then looked at me. "Was this it, 33?" *Hmmm ... this is close, so very close.*

"This one has that Sidle on N vibe, Monique. Just not totally sure."

"Are you sure that we're on the right side of the street?" *Or, even on the right street?*

“Yes, we’re on the right side of the street as we walk away from central San Francisco towards China.”

“Ok, silly-dilly ... I mean, do you think it was on the other side of the street, as in over there?” Monique quickly pointed across Judah.

“No, I am certain that it was on this side, astute Agent 32.”

“What makes you so certain of that, 33?”

“Well, I can remember seeing a few shards of heavily filtered sunlight hit the concrete floor for a few seconds. I can see the dust in the air. Those scenes would not have occurred on the other – south – side of the street.”

“You remember that?”

“Absolutely.”

“You remember the oddest things, Parkaar. But, yes, it sounds believable.”

“My brain is not totally baked just yet, 32; it’s just slightly parboiled.” *Parboiled loon.*

“That’s what you say.”

“Why, of course it’s what I say, Monique. Or, is it that chip you planted behind my left ear last night?” *What?*

We both laughed and continued our fabled-bar-seeking trek. Nothing of consequential note appeared between 44<sup>th</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup> Avenues. We walked in silence, letting our thoughts bounce down the in-street railroad tracks. *If I were a superball ...*

Then as we neared La Playa, Monique chirped out her plea.

“Hey, want to duck into Lava Peach for a cup of hot coffee? I’m freezing!” She even shivered a couple of times.

“Sure, 32; let’s do it.” *I know what he wants later.*

We entered the corner coffeehouse and ordered a couple of caramel mochachinos, or something like that. While waiting, I spotted a psecret psociety quadra-fold on a table near the front window. I showed it to Monique.

“You sent copies of your short stories here?”

“I did. To here and many other places in the Bay Area.”

“Knowing you all too well, 33, I bet you’ll use this occurrence in a future short story.” *Of course!*

“Yeah, I would think that is a safe bet, Monique.”

Our coffees came and we sipped at them at a corner table. They were piping hot and delicious. The whipped cream laced in liquid caramel was sinfully divine. I had to have more.

I went up and paid for an extra blast-n-drip. Maybe I was at a low-blood-sugar-level moment. But, if I was, that was surely corrected the deficiency.

We sat back and relaxed, just taking in the scenery and the peopery. [sic] The busy South American college-age barista was all a-hustle. *I don't think that I could do her job. Hell, I know I couldn't. What a tough gig when it's this busy.*

A Caucasian, very bookish-looking, 40-something lady with dark hair was reading at a window-side table. She had the largest-lensed glasses that I had ever seen. She was buried in her new hardback novel. *I wonder what she is reading. Romance? Mystery? Mysterious romance? Romantic mystery? How in the world can she read in here? The light is so low and the noise is so high. I couldn't stay story-focused for one paragraph.*

A bronze-faced, athletically thin, 20-something surfer dude in a black wetsuit walked in with his board under right arm, exhaling visible vapor. *He's probably balling some hottie around here tonight. / I bet he likes the barista ... likes to pump her hard.*

A pair of Asian female high-school students were doing their math homework together on a bench seat, while occasionally giggling. *It was probably a text message. One of them has a crush on some schoolboy. Yeah, it's obvious.*

An Amerasian businessman was now getting some pastries to-go, while juggling with his cell phone. *The wife sure has him jumping. She must be hungry back at the house. / This guy is obviously hen-pecked.*

More sounds of the cash register drawer opening and closing. <cha-ching> *Business sure is brisk. I wonder how much money this place brings in.*

Then the mixing of soft conversations. *Oh, my Lord! Did she say something about an utin? [utin, Tagalog and Cebuano for penis] Is she from the Philippines?*

Some workers were leisurely fixing some issue with the side window's sill. They were getting ready to shim it and re-caulk it. *They seem to be milking this task. They're probably getting paid by the hour and not by the job.*

And then the sound of the waves in the distance. *I wonder how high those waves are. I haven't even seen the ocean yet due to this dense fog.*

All of a sudden, I noticed separate eddy streams of fog wafting and curling past the open door. *This really is Fogville USA. I love it! Wish I could afford it. / His mind is lost in the fog.*

Three Caucasian guys in college sweatshirts were talking about the upcoming ball game near the counter. A skinny white dude in a sleeveless T-shirt was leaning against a

utility pole, just outside the front door. Monique was studying him. *I wonder if he is bayot. [gay in Cebuano]*

An Hispanic plumber at a table across the room had a water hammer arrestor in his hand. (Reference the *Water Hammer* short story.) He seemed to be measuring the pipe gauge.

Then an older white man walked in, saying, “Yep, yep, yep ...” *That phrase and that man. Very familiar. Is that really him? Is that Malloy?*

I studied him closer. Then I walked up to the late-60-ish-appearing fellow, who was donning an SF Giants cap.

“Is that you Mr. Malloy?” I politely asked, now fairly confident it was him.

“Yep, yep, yep,” Mr. Malloy repeated without a stutter. (Mr. Malloy also appears in the *Mysterieau of San Francisco* novella and in the *Vermont Street* short story.)

“You’ve aged well, Malloy. Very well.”

“Yep, yep, yep, and much, much, much thanks.” *He’s still got that repetitive shtick down pat. Or, is it involuntary?*

“Hey, want to pull up a chair and chat with us? I’d love the catch-up conversation. We can put some questions to rest.”

“Sure, sure, sure.”

Malloy followed me back to our table. I grabbed a vacant chair from a nearby table for him. He quickly took a seat and cracked his knuckles a few times.

“Mr. Malloy, this is my wife, Monique,” I announced.

“Ah, yes, the lovely Agent 32. Yep, yep, yep.” *WTF! How did he know her agent number?*

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Malloy,” Monique said.

“So, so, so, what would you like to talk about?” Malloy asked, as if time were suddenly of the essence.

“Oh, just a few of things,” I said. “We won’t keep you long.”

“Would you like to know how I won the multi-million-dollar lottery?” Malloy asked out of the blue. *Holy cow! He won the lottery? Well, that would explain him being able to drop C-notes in Sidle on N. Yeah, it would make sense. He never seemed like the business millionaire type, anyway. This would explain his idle wealth.*

“Why, sure,” I said, not sure of what I would hear.

“It’s two strikes, not three,” Malloy firmly stated.

“What do you mean, Mr. Malloy?” Monique asked, very interested to know.



“Once you pick your set of numbers, don’t change any of them until they have been called twice – not once,” Malloy said while rubbing his right hand across his forehead. “It’s two hits and you’re out at the old Malloy lottery game.”

“So, don’t change a number the first time it’s called on a non-winning ticket?” Monique asked, while taking mental notes.

“No, not the first time,” Malloy said while tapping his left index finger on the wooden table. “But, don’t wait for the third strike, either. And, make sure you play every drawing. Skip one and you may be skipping out early.”

“Thanks for the gambling advice, Malloy, and a big congrats. I guess you’ll be buying the next round of drinks. Hey, I’m just kidding.”

“Yep, yep, yep,” Malloy beeped out. “What is your second question, Agent 33?” *He must know Ernie.*

“Well, Malloy, the real reason that we’re out here in the sunless Sunset today is to revisit the old Sidle on N,” I confessed. “However, we can’t seem to find it. Would you happen to remember exactly where it was?”

“Sidle on N. Sidle on N. Sidle on N.” Malloy now looked sad.

“Yeah, Sidle on N,” I confirmed. “Back in ’92. Wasn’t it in the mid-40 avenues, somewhere around 44<sup>th</sup> or 45<sup>th</sup>?”

“Yep, yep, yep. It surely was, Agent 33. But, after Tsula [a character in the *Mysterieu of San Francisco* novella] died in there, they soon scraped it away.” *Oh, no!*

“Tsula is dead? How?!” I could hardly believe it.

“She was all party-party-party one night with the owner. Too many pills and booze. Overdose, the coroner said. There was a fire, too. Many suspect that there was foul play, and that the fire was intentionally set to cover it. But, no murder or arson conviction ever came about. The place was a total loss. It was finally bulldozed back in January of 1995. The owner later did go to prison, but it was for tax evasion. Yep, yep, yep.” *Wow!*

“Woah, what a tragic ending to our old haunt, Malloy,” I said while looking down at the table. *What a horrid ending.*

“Where did you end up?” Malloy asked me.

“Back in Charlotte. But, I bet you already knew that.”

“Oh, just checking your veracity, Agent 33, Yep, yep, yep. Just check-check-checking.”

Monique was speechless.

## 21. Zoo Are You? (May 2014)

A delightfully dank, overcast, April Monday found Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) motoring north up NC 49 towards the NC Zoo. It seemed like a good day to get some help from our animal friends for a short story.

“Parkaar, [my ailing alias] have you ever been to this zoo?” Agent 32 asked out of the gray.

“Not in a long, long time, Monique.”

“How long, 33?”

“Oh, I think it was 1977, the year after it opened.”

“That’s 37 years ago! It’s probably much different now.”  
*Those animals have probably died and been replaced.*

“Yeah, maybe so, Monique. Maybe they’ve removed the walls and fences.” *I bet that he only said that because of that darn digital audio recorder. I just know that he has already switched it on.*

“Removed the walls and fences? Lions, tigers and elephants running free with the people? Are you crazy?!” *Maybe so.*

“Well, you know the answer to that question, Agent 32.”

Monique laughed for a few seconds. Then the conversation stopped. Our thoughts got lost in the passing forest.

After three or four news stories on the radio, we were passing a wooden sign that read:

**Welcome to Asheboro – Home of the NC Zoo**

“So, North Carolina has an Asheville and an Asheboro?” Monique suddenly asked.

“Yep, and neither one is in Ashe County. Figure that out.”

Monique shook her head. “You crazy kanos! [Filipino slang for Americans] What’s up with that?”

I scratched my chin. “I have no idea, Agent 32. I wasn’t around back then for the naming of places.”

Soon we were pulling into the zoo’s North American entrance parking lot. It wasn’t very crowded. We parked away from other vehicles. But, sure enough, one slid in right next to us, on my side.

“All these open spots, and this guy parks right next to us,” I griped. “Why? What is it with some people?”

“Oh, just calm down, 33. Don’t be a grouch today.”

We slugged down some energy fluids and marched on in. I noticed that the asphalt paths were not as smooth as before, as surface roots had created small ridges and cracks. *Looks kind of like the Campbell Creek Greenway in Charlotte, the section near the gristmill ruins.*

And then, for some unbeknownst reason, it made me think of a Korean American girl in my 7<sup>th</sup> grade class at a parochial school in Charlotte, who always put serifs on her 1s, so that they looked like giraffe heads. My calligraphic musing was broken by Monique’s question.

“Does this zoo have giraffes, Parkaar? And, if so, where are they?” *How odd that she should ask about giraffes just now. Psyche-psychronicity? [sic]*

“I think it does, 32. They’re over in the African section. We’ll make our way over there.”

We began our tour of the North American section. There were some non-moving American alligators in a cypress swamp, just lying in wait.

“Are they real?” Monique asked.

“Oh, yes, very real, Agent 32. You don’t want to fall in there. If you did, you would be amazed at how quickly they come to life.” *Yikes! Let me back away from this fence.*

“They look like plastic props in a C-grade horror movie, Parkaar.” *She’s right; they do.*

“These ancient reptiles don’t waste energy, Monique; they wait for the right moment to attack.”

“Do you think that they would eat a cowhide-covered, three-inch-wide, white ball, commonly called a baseball?” *Now she’s playing for the recorder.*

“Ah, recycling and refining past lines are we, Monique?” *Dang. He remembers them all.*

We both had a laugh and threw out a few more past lines. And that’s about how it went as we passed the bored polar bear. *I bet that bear would love to eat us. Tasty human flesh.*

While continuing on our trek, we watched a seal effortlessly swim several underwater laps for us, as we viewed him/her through a subsurface window. *I wonder if any agents are here today.*

Then it really went to the bears: black, brown and grizzly. *I wonder if they know what I’m thinking. Oh, wait; what am I thinking?*

As we rounded a bend, we came upon a good view of some American bison. They were just lazily grazing on a field, passing time with large boulders.

Monique then chuckled. “Those two look like Blesseltone and the Suzaffalo! [of Group Z, the enemy camp] Let’s not get too close. We might get an epic anal spray.” *Major yuck!*

I laughed. “Gouda won, 32.”

“Nice coinage, 33. Spare change, dude?”

I chuckled. Monique had successfully imitated the intonation of the most recent aggressive panhandler that we had encountered in Plasma-Wigwood (hip slang for the Plaza-Midwood area of east Charlotte).

Next, there were a pair of red wolves trotting the same route over and over. Their narrow path was being worn bare, and quickly becoming an orange-clay gulley. *Maybe these guys need a larger pen. They’re going nuts.*

Then it was the hot-and-oh-so-dry Sonora Desert enclosure, surrounded by copious prickly cacti. *What an environment.*

“Wow, what is that odor, 33? Did you heavenly utot? [fart in Tagalog] ... again?”

“No, it wasn’t me; well, not this time.”

From there, we kind of got lost and decided to sit down and take a break. We overheard some other zoo visitors talking behind us.

“So, whereabouts are y’all from?” an older white male asked.

“We’re from Nash County,” a large, white female said.

“Really? We are, too. Hey, did you hear about old Ed Bullinger?”

“No, what happened to him?”

“Well, he was sharpening his lawn mower blades and died.”

“Oh, my sweet Lord! How in the world did that happen?”

“He had the tractor-mower’s front-end hoisted up by an old rope – the one that he had been using for the past forty years – but, this time it broke. The coroner said blunt-force chest trauma.”

“Oh, darn. I hate to hear that. That’s a shame.”

“But, you know old Ed was always so darn stubborn. He had been warned by Margie-Lynn not to do that time and time again, but you couldn’t tell him anything.”

“Well, I suppose no one will be telling him anything now, except God. Rest his soul.”

My audio recorder suddenly chirped. *Darn. The battery is already low. Shouldn’t have bought those cheapo batteries.*

The people from Nash County stopped talking and looked at me.

I pointed at a buzzing overhead light-fixture ballast. “They really need to replace that before OSHA shows up.”

Then Monique and I got up and walked away. *I bet old Ed never knew that he’d get mentioned in a psecret psociety pshort pstory. [sic] His fatal stunt will be immortalized on Facebook, in limited-edition print copies, and on e-book websites.*

“You know, Parkaar, if Kirk were here, he would say, ‘Awkward!’” *In Auckland?*

“Yeah, I know, Monique. I can hear his voice saying it right now.”

We passed through Junction Plaza and entered the African section. First up was the Forest Aviary, in which specific birds practiced general aviation and strafe-bombing without a license. *Should have worn that wide-brimmed Australian field hat.*

Then it was on to the baboons. *Oh, the baboonery [sic] of it all.*

“Agent 33, what’s the deal with their bright-pink-colored, bald butts?”

“Severe roid rage, Agent 32. Hemorrhoids on steroids.”

“Seriously, Parkaar.”

“Oh, I think it has something to do with mating. You know, keeping the species going.”

“Ew! It looks so gross! Is that supposed to be arousing?”

“Maybe to a baboon, Monique.”

“Let’s move along before I throw up.”

Next up was a large glade of elephants, gazelle, antelope, and a lone rhino off in the distance.

“Agent 32, I bet that lone rhino knows that it’s not Wednesday, July 29, 1992 in southeastern San Francisco.”

“What in the world are you talking about, 33?”



“For some odd reason, it seemed like the line to say nine seconds ago.”

“You just might need some professional help, Parkaar.”  
*Maybe so. Maybe so.*

“Yeah? Well, who knows? Hey, I just added it for non-causal effect to keep you guessing, 32.” *He must have put some magic granules in his coffee this morning.*

We moved away from the wall, evading the lone rhino’s last charge, and ambled along to the Akiba Tram Stop. Good seats were still available.

“Want to jump aboard, Monique?”

“No, I’ve got my best walking shoes on. I’m doing fine. Still got a couple of miles left.”

“Ok, kewl deal, Agent 32. Let’s keep krushing [*sic*] those calories [*sic*] with hard k’s.” *What’s with his hard k kick?*

Just as we came around the bend at the African section entrance/exit, we saw a pair of giraffes and a zebra. Monique raced to the vista point and snapped some pics.

“Yey! I’m so happy that I got to see the giraffes! They are my favorite animals in the zoo.”

“I see.”

“Parkaar, the zoo in Manila didn’t have any. Well, at least not when I went. I was disappointed. I’m so glad to see them here today.”

“How much did the giraffe win the race by, Monique?”

“A neck.”

“How did you know the answer?”

“Really? Really, 33?”

We continued looping back towards Junction Plaza, stopping to see the chimps and lemurs.

“Agent 33, those chimpanzees were so loving of each other, but where were the lions?”

“They had the day off for good behavior.”

“Very funny, Parkaar. It says on the map that there are lions in this area.”

“In this area? On this side of the fence?!”

Monique laughed. “No, silly, back there.” She was now pointing at the brochure map.

“Remember that pen where we saw those men working, Agent 32?”

“Yes, Agent 33.” *I hope all this agent-number talk doesn't get us any unwarranted attention by security.*

“Well, that was the lions' pen, Agent 32.”

“Well, where did they put them?”

“Probably in the other parking lot, Monique.” I guffawed.

Monique was less than amused. “Why did I even ask?” *I knew that she was going to ask that rhetorical question. / He seems quite amused with himself now. Did he sell another copy of his 'Gold' novel? Probably those extra-spatial grains.*

Monique then noticed that I had become lost in my thoughts once again.

“What are you thinking, Parkaar?”

“Well, I can promise you that I wasn’t wondering who might have been at that particular NL [National League] West baseball game back in July of 1992. Not until now.”

“Give that meaningless baseball game a merciful rest, 33. Focus on the here and now, my bana. [bana is Cebuano for husband] Enjoy this amazing zoo.”

“Are you including the humans?” *Zoomans [sic]*

Monique just rolled her eyes and sighed.

Soon we were riding on the tram to the North American exit. The cool air felt perfectly refreshing as the three-car tram quietly rounded the curves and went up and down the Uwharrie hills like a senior citizens’ roller-coaster.

I bought Monique a fuchsia-on-black NC ZOO cap from the gift shop, which was strategically placed just before the exit.

Then we were out of the lioness-less parking lot and heading back on NC 159 to Asheboro. We grabbed some mid-afternoon grub at the Taco Bell on NC 49/US 64.

“The Cantina Bowls here have more food than those in Charlotte. [reference the *Overheard & Overhead* short story] Yey, I like it!”

“Are you sure about that, Monique?”

“Yes, 33, the plates are heavier here.” *Maybe it’s the plastic?*

After we were finished eating, we went dessert-seeking and landed at a strip-mall slot named Di’Lishi. A white, high-school-age lass took our order.

“Say, do you ever get tourists in here looking for the Biltmore House?” I asked.

She pounced. "Are you kidding? All the freakin' time."

"How is Asheboro?" Monique asked.

"Well, this is the coolest spot in town – a frozen yoghurt joint. Asheville's got a happening scene; Asheboro's yet to happen. Asheville's got the Blue Ridge Parkway; Asheboro's got the Zoo Parkway. Asheville's got the Blue Ridge Mountains; Asheboro's got the Uwharrie mounds."

"Well, everyone has been friendly here," I said. "It seems ok. I think you're knocking your town too hard. Just get some **Zoo Are You?** T-shirts printed and away you'll go." *Zoo are you? Who are these freaks?*

"Where are you all from, anyway?" she asked.

"Charlotte," Monique said.

"Yeah." *Why did she say 'Yeah'? That was odd.* She felt her necklace. "You came up for the zoo, right?"

"Yep," we said.

"And, let me guess ... an up and back, never to return again. NC Zoo box: check. One and done."

"We're staying the night, and we'll probably come back again," I said.

"For what?!" she exclaimed.

"Well, I'm always in need of fresh material," I said and smiled.

Monique started to giggle.

## 22. Overheard & Overhead (May 2014)

I had been craving – to the point of carving – a Taco Bell Cantina Bowl (yes, believe it or not) all the live-long May morning in east Charlotte. And, I know what you're thinking; well, actually, I don't – maybe Ernie the electronic earwig (the ringleader of psecret psociety) does. What's more, I know this opening paragraph is a bit obtuse, but hang on and bang on. Our little story gets more focused.

Ok, moreover than under, when I got back to our east Charlotte abode the puns ceased. I immediately commenced with some persuasive, steering-to-leading, questioning of my wife Monique, the gorgeous Agent 32.

"Say, how would you like to bike it over to Taco Bell, mahal? [mahal, love in Tagalog] It's less than two miles away."

"I don't know, 33; it's kind of hot outside, isn't it?" *I thought that he hated to ride in sauna weather.*

"Well, yeah, it is; but, it's only a 13-minute jaunt. We can outrun the sweat." *I doubt that. / It's a lie, but maybe she will believe me.*

"Thirteen minutes, Parkaar? [my ailing alias] Are you sure about that? Did you time our last trip there?"

"No, but my bike computer did, Monique." *Why, of course.*

"Oh, I should've known." *He's always measuring and logging everything. And, I'm sure he's already recording.*

“Aren’t you hungry for a Cantina Bowl? Remember how much you loved them in Asheboro? [mentioned in the *Zoo Are You?* short story] You devoured two a day.”

“They were bigger in Asheboro.” *What?*

“Well, I just know that this is our lucky day.”

“Our lucky day? A mass-produced fast-food dinner via bicycle in sweaty weather at a Taco Bell? Have you been sniffing rubber cement again, 33?” *Rubber cement?*

“Monique, you make it seem so ordinary. And, well, you know that I don’t allow anything to be ordinary, especially when the recorder is running.” *I knew it. He’s already switched on the digital audio recorder. I better watch what I say.*

“Now I’ve heard everything.” Monique then rolled her eyes.

“Ah, what do ya say? C’mon, let’s burn some calories.”

“And, then add several hundred more calories.”

“Which we will burn off on the ride back home.”

Monique sighed. “Ok, whatever, Parkaar; let’s do it. Can you get my bike out of the furnace room?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Salamat, [Thank you in Tagalog and Cebuano] Agent 33.”  
*Yey! I convinced her to go.*

I got Monique's pink Electra Townie bike out and checked the chain guard, which had come unbolted on a previous ride. It looked ok; the lock washer was doing the trick. *Seems secure.*

Then I wheeled our bikes out of the house and up the driveway. We were all set.

"Do we have everything, Parkaar?"

"I think so. We're good to go."

"Ok, let's hit it, artsy-sportsy." *She remembers.*

And with that, we were off and rolling down Kavanaugh Drive. No traffic was spotted on Somerdale Lane, so we just did a flying merge. We coasted to Abbeydale Drive and turned right. An immediate, heart-pumping incline greeted us.

"Time to pump those pedals, Agent 32!" I shouted like a football coach. Then I laughed.

Monique just looked at me as she shifted into first gear and began the ascent. Farther up we passed some tuggies, [*sic*] (as Monique calls them) of various races, who promptly yelled some nastiness at us. We didn't stop; we just kept on rolling.

After a long climb, we made a right turn onto busy North Sharon Amity Road. Well, actually, onto the western sidewalk, which is essentially an elevated bike lane, as there

is no planting strip (no blocked sightlines) and rarely any pedestrians to navigate.

I stayed on guard for turning cars as we crossed Sudbury Road. And then we passed Love Avenue. I noticed that the street sign was higher up the pole than most. *I bet that sign gets stolen a lot. That's why they have it set way up there.*

Next, we crossed Tarrywood Lane, and after that, Auburndale Road. And when I saw the cacti garden on the right, I knew it was time to stop. *End of this sideline.*

We dismounted our bikes. When there was a sufficient gap in the southbound traffic, we walked our bikes to the eight-foot-wide concrete median. There we waited for a break in the stream of two-lane northbound traffic. The feeling at this point was six or a half dozen.

When a large gap opened (after about a minute), we made the crossing to the other sidewalk like a wide receiver tiptoeing into the end zone after leaving a defender down on the field.

A quarter of a mile down the sidewalk, we turned to the left to enter a carless church parking lot. We exited the newly-paved asphalt lot onto Wilora Lake Drive. Next, we turned right onto Stilwell Oaks and rode it all the way down to the partially torn-down, four-foot-high, galvanization-failing, chain-link fence, narrowly evading a footloose and collar-free dog.

Using the concrete steps and adjacent dirt trail, we walked our bikes down to the back service road of the old, now-



rubble-ized [sic] Eastland Mall. *All those late-'70s and early-'80s memories ... now in the dust.*

We cut across the wide, weeds-in-the-cracks, parcelizing [sic] asphalt parking lot, and pumped it up the hill to the traffic light at Central Avenue.

Once across, we pedaled on the empty sidewalk to Burger King. I prepared to stop, while Monique kept going. She then looked back at me and I realized my mistake.

“Oh, yeah; we’re going to Taco Bell. Sorry, 32. My bad.”

She just grinned. Her facial expression seemed to suggest that she was thinking of something. Perhaps it was: *He’s tired. Those long 10-and-a-half-hour days are making him mentally unfocused. Hope he stays off a car’s hood. Or, doesn’t end up under one.*

We soon had the bikes locked up around a well-planted, sturdy *Handicapped Parking Only* metal signpost.

“You think it’s ok to lock them up to this signpost, Parkaar?”

Monique was concerned. She thought that the manager might impound them. Well, actually, I am not so sure what she was thinking.

“They should be ok here, Agent 32,” I replied. “They don’t have a bike rack proper.” *A bike rack proper? He’s speaking for future readers again.*

“But, it’s a handicapped sign. It’s kind of insulting to tie bicycles to it, when the person parking in front of it may not be able to walk.”

“Hey, I’m handicapped, Monique. Mentally handicapped. I have that shunt, you know. It affects my bike-mooring decisions.” *Bike-mooring decisions? He’s just being silly now.*

“Ok, that’s enough, Parkaar. I’m hungry. Let’s go inside and get something to eat.” *She needs to carb up, and quick.*

I nodded. “Stellar idea, Monique.”

Once inside the fast foodery, [*sic*] we moved right up to the counter. The only other customer was picking up their bag of grub and leaving. *Ah, perfect timing. No line.*

At the place-your-order-here register, a familiar face greeted us. It was the kewl, [*sic*] young, attentive black dude with the Rasta dreads. He, too, recognized us from past visits.

“Back again for Cantina Bowls?” he cheerfully asked in a very professional manner.

“You got it, man,” I said.

“We’re addicted,” Monique added and laughed. *This could be a commercial at this point.*

He noticed our bike helmets. “You guys biked it again, I see.” *Darn, forgot to lock the bike helmets up outside.*

“Yep, you know it,” I said.

Monique tacked on another line. "He loves to ride his bike everywhere in Charlotte." *I don't think I would ride to the airport.*

"Hey, I just got a bike," our Taco Bell Employee-of-the-Month said.

"Ah, most excellent," I said.

"I rode it to my mom's house last weekend," the lad said.

"And, where is that?" I asked, not sure of what place I would be here.

"Off Barrington Drive."

"Ok," I said to show my interest was still there, as well as to keep the conversation flowing. "And whereabouts do you live?" *How far away from Hampshire Hills?*

"Down on Village Lake Drive," he calmly stated.

"Wow, you rode your bike from Village Lake to Barrington?" I asked, somewhat stunned by the distance he travelled, while wondering what route he took.

"Yeah," he said with no sense of accomplishment.

"That's cranking it, dude!"

Then he let out a little laugh. "It was a ride, alright." He smiled. "Listen, I'll have your Cantina Bowls right out. You guys can go have a seat."

“Thanks,” Monique said.

“Appreciate that, man,” I said as we began to walk away.

Our Cantina Bowls soon arrived. They looked fresh and smelled pretty good for a fast-food behemoth.

Monique studied the size of the portions. “See, 33, these are not as big as the ones in Asheboro. Now, what did I say?”

Sometimes a low-hanging pun can’t go unpicked; thus, I said, “See, 33, these are not as big as the ones in Asheboro.”

“Ah, very *Airplane*-ish, Parkaar.” (We had recently watched the movie *Airplane* on TV.)

“You got me there, 32.”

“I always get you.”

“Yep, yep, yep.”

“Hey, don’t go Malloy [a character in the *Mysterieau of San Francisco* novella, and in the short stories *A Search for Sidle on N* and *Vermont Street*] on me, 33.”

“Ok, I won’t. Say, did you like the movie *Airplane*, Agent 32?”

“Well, it pounds on the puns. That’s for sure.”

“But, better than punning on the pounds.”

“Such excessive wordplay, 33. I guess it was right up your alley.”

“Yep.”

Our kind and now familiar Taco Bell employee returned to our table from behind the counter. “Need anything else?”

“No, we’re good, man,” I replied. “Thanks for asking, though.”

“Are you a writer, by chance?” he asked. *What a question? How did he know? Is he already in psecret psociety and all chummy with Ernie?*

“Well, I kind of slid into it. I had to shift gears after my *great* – feel free to chortle – wobble-a-dabble art career went a-thud.” *Wobble-a-dabble? He clearly said that for the microphone.*

He chuckled. *This guy is baked.*

“I wrote a novel titled *Gold, a summer story*, but it sells like ice in a Canadian snowstorm.”

“That’s funny stuff, man,” he said. “Do you do comedy?”

“No, that would be my brother in Florida. I primarily write little short stories, usually around two thousand words, give or take a few hundred.”

“Folded-up short stories?” he asked with a look of theory-confirming discovery.

“Did you find one of my quadra-folds?” *This is so unbelievable. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. My Parkaaroni*

*[sic] has done it again. I guess it was a lucky day for him. Still like the Taco Bell in Asheboro better, though.*

“A quadra-fold?” He looked puzzled by the term.

“Oh, a single sheet of paper folded into fourths. A horizontal fold and a vertical fold. And maybe in that order.” *No letting up with him today.*

“Yeah, I did. It was orange. Kind of weird. I forget what it was about.” He then chuckled.

“It was that good, huh?” I laughed, too.

“I remember that it involved recording. Any recording devices on now?”

“Step outside and smile for that red weather balloon,” I replied.

### 23. **Carolina Beached** (June 2014)

A cold, windy, fabulously forlorn, thought-inducing winter day in late January of 1986. Canal Drive, Carolina Beach. As reviewer/critic Scott Homewood would later say: “You could roll a bowling ball all the way down that street and not hit a single person or thing.” Nothing, except for the Hotel Astor at the end, some 1.3 miles away.

It was now dusk. A chillier, eerier dusk. Otherworldly clouds were moving in from the north, flying low and scraping rooftops. A sense of foreboding infused the chilly air.

The old four-story inn, the Hotel Astor, with its iconic sign on the roof, transfixed our gaze. The sign consisted of individual block letters on a welded metal frame. The red letters slowly pulsed (seemingly in sync with our baked brains).

We – my 20-year-old brother Joe (future agent number unknown), Frank von Peck (future Agent 107), age 21, and I (future Agent 33), age 21 – were standing in their just-rented, stilted bungalow’s concrete driveway, mesmerized by that sign. (It had been a green brownie kind of day, kidding yew in knots.)

I finally spoke out a passing thought, hoping that my mouth could satisfactorily announce the English syllables coherently.

“Ah, the old Hotel Astor. That place sure has some history.”

“I wonder when it was built,” Joe said.

Frank then chimed in. “Probably in the ‘50s.”

Now I could show off my newly acquired locale knowledge. “Guys, it was actually built in 1936, and the original name was Hotel Royal Palm. In 1983 it became Hotel Astor. Notice how the lower support bar for the word ASTOR is too long. This is because it originally supported two words: ROYAL PALM.”

“Where did you find that out?” Joe asked.

“I’ll tell you later, in a safer place,” I replied, chuckled, and then continued. “Over the decades, numerous people have fallen inside and outside that hotel. In fact, on this day in 1945, the hotel manager, a fellow named James Hayes, fell down the elevator shaft.”

“Who told you this, Mr. Arty Smarty?” Frank asked.

“Ok, ok ... I admit that I did some crack research on Carolina Beach before I left Charlotte,” I told them.

Joe then added an anecdote. “I know some dudes and chicks who have partied on that roof, right next to that sign.”

“Damn, that’s some risky shit!” I interjected.

Joe continued. “They rented rooms on the fourth floor and climbed out the windows and onto the roof.”

“Did they get busted?” Frank asked.

“I don’t think so,” Joe said. “They got away with it, I believe. And, they said that the sign is not silent; it is actually quite noisy with electric sounds - humming and clicking.”



“Then, a-humming and a-clicking we shall go!” Frank announced.

“Where?” I asked, fearing what he was going to say.

“To the Hotel Astor!” Franked enthusiastically blasted.

“Have you lost your mind?!” I asked.

“What? Don’t be a wimp.”

Frank was really wanting to go. I could see it in his crazed eyes. *He is hell-bent on doing something risky tonight.*

“I don’t know, Frank,” I said while giving a shake of the head.

“Are we just going to stare at a sign all night? C’mon, dudes; let’s have some adventure. Mike, you’re acting like an old man.”

I thought up a retort. “You guys just got this killer three-bedroom beach house with a nice sound view. Do you really want to spend \$80 on a hotel room, just to have access to the roof on a cold-ass winter night?”

No reply. Frank and Joe were both non-swayed.

Joe remembered the rear of the hotel. Then he suggested a plan of attack. “We don’t have to rent a room at the hotel. The fire escape ladder runs down the backside of the building, and is only eight feet above the ground. We could go in my work van. I can park it under the ladder. Once on top of the van, it’s a very easy climb to the roof.” *Oh, dear.*

“But, what about the cops?” I asked out of utmost legal concern. “Isn’t the CBPD [Carolina Beach Police Department] station down there?”

Joe had that prefigured into his ascending equation. “It is, but their limited off-season staff is just focused on the boardwalk bars. We’ll just wear dark clothing. We should be fine. Trust me.” *Oh, boy.*

Frank then turned and looked at me. “Looks like it’s two to one in my favor, dude. Don’t wuss out on us.”

“Ok, Frank; I’ll play along. But, if we should get caught ...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know the drill; it will all be my idea, all my fault. Sure, you can pin it all on me.”

We went back in the house and changed into our darkest clothes and coats. A Pink Floyd CD was still playing in the living room. It was *Wish You Were Here*. Strange, the little details one remembers.

We quickly ate some snack food and slugged down a final beer. Well, my brother and I had one last brew. Frank, never much for alcohol of any formulation, elected for a glass of chocolate milk. He was already thoroughly weed-woven, which meant he was on his A game (A for astonishing).

“Ok, you guys ready to do this?” Frank asked. He was now ready to roll. *Hope this crazy stunt goes off without a hitch – a police hitch.*

Joe gulped down his Old Milwaukee and chucked the aluminum can towards the kitchen trash can. It bounced off

the dark wood paneling and we all laughed (for some reason). He looked at Frank. "Sure, I'm ready. Just one second. Let me get my keys."

Joe soon returned from his bedroom with his keys and we were out the door. Frank took the shotgun position in the van. The engine started and Joe carefully backed up, making sure that his mirrors didn't get clipped by the house-support pilings.

Joe slid a Bad Company CD in the slot and carefully observed the 25 MPH speed limit as we slowly neared our hotel destination, looming and pulsating up ahead. It was so strangely quiet outside.

"How long do you plan on staying up there on the roof?" I asked Frank.

"Until we feel cold." *We?*

And with that remark, the in-transit conversation ceased. Everyone was pensive. I spied the moon for a few seconds, but then the white-gray clouds quickly covered it back up.

Joe cautiously passed the Hotel Astor and made a right turn onto Raleigh Avenue. That's when I saw the rusty, faded off-yellow, narrow fire-escape ladder that he was talking about. *So, that's our way to the roof. Sure hope there are no rusted-out rungs. A forty-foot fall would truly suck. Well, for a couple of seconds.*

No one was on the street. There was just a lone green sedan behind the hotel. And, no one appeared to be in the car.

Joe calmly backed up his Dodge Tradesman 100 van under the old fire escape. Then he cut the engine off. We looked at each other, gauging our resolve to this crazy idea. *I guess we're going to do this. So far, so good. Hope the cops don't see us.*

"Well, we're here," Joe finally said. "Now, who wants to go up first?"

I looked at Frank. "Frank, I think that's your cue."

Frank looked around. The coast was clear. "I'm going for it, dudes."

And, out the door Frank went, vanishing behind the van. He used the rear bumper to slither up to the van's roof. With an easy 14-inch step up, he was on the first rung of the old fire-escape ladder, and he wasn't waiting for us. *Wow, there he goes with no hesitation.*

Frank stormed up the rust-flaked, but still structurally solid, ladder like a commando, and was almost at the top when a police cruiser passed by and looked at the van. *Oh, crapola! This aint good. Think fast, Mike.*

"I'll take care of this, Joe."

I quickly got out of the van and looked at the right front tire (as a diversion). My brother picked up on what I was doing, and walked over to examine the tire with me.

The police cruiser backed up as Frank made it to the roof and out of sight of anyone on the ground. The CBPD car

stopped right in front of our van, blocking us, and then the white, rotund, slack-jowled, 50-something cop got out.

“Having some tire trouble, are we?” he asked. His face reflected thirty-five hard years on the beach-town force.

I quickly thought of a ruse. Then I spoke to the police officer, trying to sound like an innocent, dopy tourist. *Hope I sound convincing.*

“Oh, I heard a bottle shatter under this tire, officer. We were just making sure that no shards of glass had punctured it.”

The veteran CBPD officer shined his black flashlight on the tire. “Looks fine to me. Go ahead and drive it around and see if it loses any air. You can’t leave it here.”

“Ok, sure, sir,” Joe said.

“Thanks,” I added.

And with that, we – my brother and I – were gone, leaving Frank on the hotel roof. As we began to go back down Canal Drive, my brother spoke up.

“Hey, what about Frank? We can’t leave him on the roof.”

“We can’t go back there, Joe; if we do, the cops will know something is up. Frank will be ok. He probably saw the whole episode. He can drop eight feet without getting hurt.”

“Yeah, you’re right. And, it’s only a little over a mile to our house. Frank can walk that far, even if he has to chain-smoke his way back over the course of an hour.”

“Yeah, he’ll huff and puff his way back, Joe. He’ll wait until it’s all clear.”

We continued tootling north on Canal Drive. It was still very quiet outside – so unlike six months prior (the summer tourist season). Many bungalows and condos appeared to be unoccupied.

A couple of minutes later, and Joe was parking his van under the bungalow. We went inside. It was 8:35 PM. We popped a beer and talked about our lucky close call.

“You don’t think that Frank could fall off the roof in his stupor?” I asked my brother.

“Stupor? He’s not in a stupor; he’s in a *super*.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. He seems to get more agile on weed, where as I – and most people – get accident-prone.”

“Mike, he could scale that hotel like Spiderman right now. Well, maybe not quite that agile, but more so than most.”

“Yeah, no doubt; I agree.”

At 9:17 PM there was a loud knock on the door.

“I think that’s our man,” I said.

Joe opened the door. It was a shivering Frank.

“Get me to some heat and pronto. It’s cold as hell out here!” Frank was very white in the face. “Oh, and thanks for leaving me up on that roof. That was one frigid, long-ass walk. Thanks for the lift. Not.”

“I guess you saw what happened to us down below,” I ventured.

“Yep, I saw the whole dilemma unfold.”

“Frank, we couldn’t go back,” Joe said.

“How was it up there?” I asked out of curiosity.

“A nice, frozen view, even with the low clouds. And, yes, the sign is way noisy.”

“Any spatial distortions?” I asked.

“That was Wrightsville Beach, dude. Get on the right beach. Stay on the current story.” *Currents. Connecting currents.*

“Right,” I replied. “Sorry, my bad, Frank.”

“Hey dudes, I did read some strange graffiti on the sign support frame,” Frank revealed with a more animated expression. He was thawing out.

“Let me guess ... notes of a rooftop romp, or some amorous announcement?” I suggested.

“No, not the usual relationship graffiti – a one-liner that stopped me dead in my shingle-scaling tracks.”

I looked at Frank. “Ok, enough with the suspense, Frank. What did the graffiti say?”

“The penknife engraving read: ‘I will burn this place down in 2005, signed JPS.’ Is that whacked or what? Announcing your arson 19 years in advance to rooftop partiers.”

“Yeah, that’s majorly whacked, Frank,” I said.

“I don’t know anyone with those initials,” my brother added.

“Maybe it stands for a phrase,” I said. “You know, like FTW means Fuck The World.”

“Just Puke Silently,” Joe submitted.

We all laughed.

“Well, we’ll have something to talk about someday.”

And with that we all puffed the porcelain dragon (Frank’s bong) and crashed.

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And on July 18, 2006 from the WECT website in Wilmington:

The man who burned down an historic Carolina Beach hotel is on his way to prison.

John Patrick Shannon pleaded guilty Tuesday to attempted first-degree arson. A judge sentenced him to three years behind bars.

Shannon apparently set fire to the Astor Hotel (aka Hotel Astor) in Carolina Beach last year. Dozens of witnesses told police they saw Shannon around the hotel at the time of the fire. The blaze started when a couch on the front porch was ignited.

The hotel was later bulldozed to the ground.



24. **Windmill with a View** (June 2014)

Prefaçonial [sic] remarks.

Yes, another short story centered around that knowhere [sic] bar called Sidle on N. I know what you are thinking: *Jeez, Mike, another one? Really?*

Please bear with me for just a few more. The vault of 2014 is now almost emptied.

These Sidle on N short stories led up to the *Mysterieau of San Francisco* novella. Some of the characters, scenes and plot ideas made it to the novella; others are lying in the fog somewhere in westernmost San Francisco.

Curiously enough, Mr. Malloy was on holiday for this one. Maybe there was a Giants home game.

Any ways and all waves, thanks for your interest, time and mind space.

*-MB*

It was back in the summer of 1992, while in a small studio apartment in downtown San Francisco (in the infamous Tenderloin) – way before psecret psociety was created and formally promulgated on Facebook (and obviously long before Facebook) – that I imagined myself as some kind of meta-real agent. I knew the agency part would fall into place sooner or later (actually, much later).

I found myself having another end-of-day grog at Sidle on N on Judah Street. (The bar, Sidle on N, is featured in the *Mysterieau of San Francisco* novella, as well as in the short stories, *A Search for Sidle on N*; *Water Hammer*; *Ok, Roll the Dice*; and *The Right Triangle*.) As usual, and as prescribed, only three people were in the little dive bar in the Outer Sunset district of San Francisco.

There was a 40-something, slightly pudgy, mustachioed, white guy in a cowboy hat, who kept nervously looking out the door at the perennial late-day fog passing by. He seemed paranoid. *Who is he looking out for? Is he hallucinating? Is he a marked gaucho from a lost gulch? I need to write that line down on a piece of napkin. Might use it twenty or so years from now.*

There was an Asian couple, probably college age, talking softly in a corner. *They're probably reviewing notes for an upcoming exam.*

Behind the bar today was an Amerasian dude named Dash. I was never sure if that was his birth name or just an adopted American nickname. I never asked him. He was about my age at that time: 28.

I got used to seeing him in there on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Today was a Wednesday. A Wednesday near-

evening that seemed to hang by a mid-week tendril on a branch of disbelief. Well, perhaps.

However, no one in this so-easy-to-pass-right-on-by joint was howling for abstract poetry at this moment. And, believe the essence of yew, they weren't aware of the cancer-fighting potential. And, for that matter, neither was I.

I laughed to myself when that last couplet sailed through my cranium, glancing off some remnants of gray matter. Dash caught my nascent chortle.

"Something funny, eh?" *Where did he pick up that Canadian accent? Toronto? Montréal? Hamilton? Or, maybe in Yellowknife with a steak knife?* Internal laughter.

I recomposed my countenance for anyone counting. But, wasn't sure if Dash was.

"Yeah, just a one-two combination that I might use sometime in the future. That's if I ever start writing."

"Twenty-two years from now?" *How odd that he would pick 22 years. It's always odd in here, though. Shouldn't really be surprised anymore.*

"Maybe so, Dash."

"You think that you'll still be alive?"

"I don't know. Hard to say. Do you mean exactly 22 years from now, not an even 20?" *Score.*

"Yeah, I think that I will stick with that number. Repeating digits, you know. Maybe some magic there."

"Dash, you're mad, man. But, you're no madman."

"You funny American guy, Mike."

“I’ll let you in on a little secret: It’s only parfait [perfect in French] if you can make it pay, mon ami. [‘my friend’ in French] Got to pay those bills. Must stay afloat in this stagnant moat.”

“You better write that one down, man, before you forget it.”

He handed me a red ball-point pen and a cardboard PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon) beer coaster. I jotted the line down and dated it. Then I tossed it into my green backpack and zipped it shut.

“Speaking of making it pay, how do you make it, Dash, just working three days a week? Do you have a second job somewhere? I mean, this is one expensive-ass city.”

“You aint kidding, pal. Let’s just say that I cut out a big expense.”

“Let me guess: You drive an older car that is already paid for; thus, no car payment.”

“True in part, Mike; I have no car payment. But, it’s because I have no car.”

“Well, I don’t have a car, either. This is one of the few American cities that you can live in delightfully without an automobile.”

“True dat, bro.”

“But, Dash, how do you make the rent if I may be so bold to ask?”

“I live rent-free, man.” *What?!*

“Are you a squatter in some Lower Haight, soon-to-be-razed, faltering flophouse? Or, are you in government-subsidized housing in the Western Addition?”

“No, no, Mike; nothing like that.” *I bet he camps in Golden Gate Park and showers at the Y.*

Dash grabbed his stringy goatee and ran his fingers through it like a four-tined rake. “I live in a very interesting, unique place,” he cautiously announced.

“A mental hospital?” I chuckled at my little zinger.

“You are very funny guy, Mike.”

“Oh, I’m just joking with ya.”

“You must want to be comedian.”

“No, not me.”

When Dash noticed that I was serious again, he continued with his lodging revelation. “I have a place in Golden Gate Park for the time being.” *Ah-ha! Golden Gate Park. I knew it. Just as I suspected: a camper in the bushes.*

“Oh, is that so?”

“Listen, I’d like to tell you where, but my girlfriend has sworn me to secrecy. She doesn’t want us to lose our kewl [*sic*] digs.” *Digs? Maybe they live underground. Or, semi-underground. Or, maybe in a lean-to. A lean-to-a-sand-dune.*

“So, somewhere in Golden Gate Park. That’s some prime, publicly owned, surreal [*sic*] estate if you can maintain the subterfuge. I hope they don’t find your tent behind North Lake.”

“Oh, trust me; we’re not living in a tent. I’ll give you a hint: It’s a permanent structure. That’s all I can say. I think that I shouldn’t have even said that. Can I take that hint back?”  
*Don’t think so.*

“Sure, Dash; consider it erased from my bean.” *Not.*

He looked at me and grinned. “One more dark brew to-go for the train ride back home?”

“Sure. Please put it in a brown paper bag, Dash. Thanks in advance and in retrograde.” *What a strange one he is.*

“I remember the routine, Mr. Mike.” *Mr. Mike?*

“And that is why I tip you so well.”

“You just want my sister’s phone number.” *He’s onto my little scheme.*

“Yeah, maybe so.” *Of course you do.*

“Maybe so next time,” Dash concluded.

I put a \$5 bill and five quarters down on the bar and exited the tantalizing travesty of a tavern. I crossed Judah. Lucky me, an N-line train was waiting at the western terminus. *Ah, just like I ordered it.*

I jumped aboard the front car. I couldn’t stop wondering where Dash and his girlfriend were living in Golden Gate Park. *Are they living in a large storm drain vault? No, that would be too damp. Couldn’t imagine a 20-something female voluntarily living in such a space. Are they really living in some subterranean void? Where do they use the bathroom? Outside in the woods? No, I couldn’t imagine a girl living like that. I can tell that he’s not living like that, either; he is getting a fresh shower every day. Does he have a key to some park*

*maintenance building? I bet that's it. I'll have to poke around out there this weekend.*

The MUNI train stopped at 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. The man from Sidle on N with the cowboy hat crossed the street with his head down, headed south. He glanced at the front of the train as he passed by. The last new passenger got on the rear car of the train, and we were rolling again. *I never saw him leave the bar. I wonder what his story is. Lost to time. Another mystery gone to the fog.*

Twenty-two minutes later, the N train pulled into the below-Market-Street Civic Center station. I got out and walked up to my Hyde Street studio apartment, wading through the aggressive panhandlers. I couldn't stop wondering about where Dash and his girlfriend were living in Golden Gate Park.

Four days later, I spent a whole Sunday checking out the various structures in the park for signs of human habitation. Nothing looked remotely lived in, even when I zoomed in on the sheds and maintenance shop windows with my binoculars. I was ready to call it quits in the southwestern corner of the park, when I noticed the old, broken-down, closed-up, sail-less Murphy Windmill.

I glanced at the little rectangular windows. In a middle one, I thought I saw a face. I quickly looked through my binoculars. There was a young Asian female's face surrounded by long black hair. She was looking down at me. *What the heck! Is she a ghost? Am I really seeing this?*

I saw her just for a few milliseconds. Then she was gone. She disappeared that quickly. So suddenly in fact that I wondered if I had truly seen a real living person. I then

doubted the visage altogether, and wrote it off as just another one of my dehydration delusions. *Need some water, and quick.*

However, a trip to Sidle on N the next Wednesday confirmed my initial impression.



## 25. **Ok, Roll the Dice** (June 2014)

Staying in the summer of '92 in San Francisco, and staying planted in that how-did-I-ever-stumble-into-and-root-myself-into-such-a-displacement-in-knowhere [sic], the mind-sink called Sidle on N; well, this me wondered, as yet another MUNI train clanged its way on by, parting the fog with well-learnt pry-cision. [sic] *Molecular memory?*

It was another mild, overcast, foggy-in-spots, August Thursday. Another one that I had grown to love.

Dash wasn't working today, as he only worked on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Ok, I think we covered that in a previous installment (but, just in case you are reading this first, Dash was an Amerasian bartender at a fabulously forlorn joint in the Outer Sunset district of San Francisco that went under the pun-ishing [sic] moniker of Sidle on N.)

Yeah, I can remember the little, silhouette-style, rusty metal sign. *Or, was it made out of wood and painted to look like metal? I should've taken it as a souvenir. Darn it!*

Often times the trio of Shoulda, Coulda and Woulda would be spreading Gouda cheese on some thin windmilled crackers. Ok, ok, enough nonsense. Message received, loud and clear. Let's get this tale moving nose-ward.

Maria was behind the cherry wood bar today. She was originally from Honduras, in her late 40s, and worked as you might have surmised, every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. (The 333-square-foot demi-lounge was closed on Sundays; at least, I tend to think it was.)

It was now about 3:30. They usually opened the door at three. And once it was open, no one seemed to close it.

We were the only two people in the place. I never said much to Maria. I just figured – ignorantly – that she took the part-time gig to pay bills, and had no creative interests or inclinations, or any attention to be paid outside of the day-to-day mundanities [*sic*] of life.

Boy oh boy, was I wrong, as I shelled out my sails to sea. I mean, as I shall set out to see. Or, wri-type. [*sic*] I think you get the jist of my drift. *Enough noodling!*

Anyway, I was doodling mindlessly on a copy of *SF Weekly* when Maria walked by the little table where I was sitting. She glanced at my little cartoonish rendering.

“Are you an artist?” she asked with just a slight south-of-the-border accent.

I looked up at her. “I think the jury is still out on that, Maria,” I replied.

“What do you mean by that? Does someone have to certify that you are an artist now? What is this silly city coming to?”

“I mean that I’ve been shopping my art to dozens of galleries in the Bay Area [chronicled in the novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco*] over the past five months, and I all have is two walls in a South-of-Market coffeehouse and a handful of low-dollar sales. I’m not exactly the next Andy Warhol. I’m just another forever unknown, it would seem.”

“Oh, I see; you think that only if you become famous can your art be deemed good, worthy or valuable. And, until such time, it must be caca. [Spanish for crap] That’s such

Americano loco [‘crazy American’ in Spanish] nonsense. Just keep doing your art and let the chippies [sic] fall where they may, amigo. [friend in Spanish] You understand me?”

“Sí, [Yes in Spanish] I do. I’ll take that advice. Muchas gracias, [‘Much Thanks’ in Spanish] Maria.”

“Hey, I really like that little spaceman drawing. Can I buy it?”

“Buy it? Oh, please. Here, I’ll give it to you.”

I carefully tore the nine-square-inch doodling off of the back page of the newsprint periodical. I looked at her as I handed it to her. “I hope this brings you some good luck.”

“Hold on now, amigo; I have got to pay you back with something.”

“No, really; it’s ok. I don’t want anything for this little sketch.”

“You stay right there, artistimodo.” [sic] *Artistimodo? Did I hear her right?*

“Ok, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Just uno minuto. [‘one minute’ in Spanish] Let me get my magic dice.” *Magic dice? Is she going to hustle me in a craps game? Probably some loaded dice.*

Maria walked back behind the bar. She then bent down and retrieved a small cardboard box. She seemed very excited about the box. *Honduran jumping dice?*

When she put the box down on the table where I was sitting, I noticed that it was actually covered in well-worn black velvet. She then sat down across from me.

“You’ve had this box for a long time, huh, Maria?”

“For three decades now,” she said with pride.

“I can tell that you greatly treasure what’s inside this box, Maria. You don’t have to give me your dice. Really. I already have some.” *Él no tiene estos. [Spanish for ‘He doesn’t have these.’]*

She didn’t even acknowledge my declination of offer. Maria just undid the interlocking bands and opened the small box to reveal a pair of slightly blue-tinged white dice.

“I don’t usually play craps, but when I do, I wear man diapers.” *Couldn’t resist saying that one. Probably just confused her.*

“What did you just say, amigo?” She was indeed confused by my lame joke.

“I’m not sure, Maria. It’s like the words just got shot out of my mouth from somewhere, maybe from Yellowknife.” *I really need to tone down the nonsense. It’s not fair to her.*

“All of you artists in this town are so silly.”

“Yeah, you may be right on that, Maria.”

She then intently looked in my green eyes with her dark brown eyes. “Do you want to know about your future?” she asked.

“Sure, who doesn’t?”

“Ok, amigo, grab both dice with one hand.”

I scooped up the dice, which felt very department-store ordinary, with my right hand. *I wonder if she has ever done this trick with Dash.*

I cleared my throat. “Ok, what now, Maria?”

“Ask a question to yourself – silently – don’t tell me – in which the answer is a number.” *Now I see where this is going. A little fortune-teller action. I’ll just play along so as to not hurt her feelings. Well, I may as well ask a numerically answerable question. I know one: When will I get married?*

I nodded to Maria and then rolled the dice. A lucky seven came up, made up of a six and a one. *Too bad I’m not in Reno. Maybe do a weekender next month.*

Maria looked at the dice for a few seconds. She then placed her left hand on her forehead and told me to roll again. She didn’t exactly look happy; in fact, she looked fairly distressed.

“Ok, Maria, here goes roll number two. Wish me better luck.”

And with that remark, I rolled the dice again. Boxcars. A twelve – a pair of sixes. *Hmmm ...  $7 + 12 = 19$ . Do I get married 19 years from now? Jeez, I’ll be 47! I don’t want to be in some cheesy singles bar at 47! Or, does it mean that I get married on July 12<sup>th</sup>? Or, is it going to be on December 7<sup>th</sup>? Oh, it’s just nonsense. Just stop thinking about it!*

“Would you like to know what your two dice rolls mean?”

“Why, certainly! How much does it cost?” *Here’s the rub.*

“It’s free, hombre tonto. [‘silly man’ in Spanish] The price is nada. [nothing in Spanish] Nada, nada, nada thing. Remember, amigo, I owe you for that drawing you gave me.”

“Oh, ok.”

“Here’s the interpretation as I learned from my maternal grandmother. Your roll of seven had the six die above the

one die. While rolling a seven is usually seen as good, this particular combination is not favorable. Due to this result, I had you roll again. You then rolled a twelve. What this means is that something of importance will happen in seven units from now. It could be days, weeks, months, years; only you will know. But, that endeavor will not be successful. However, that endeavor will be re-attempted twelve units later with success. This is all that I can tell you.”

“Well, thank you, Maria, for that interesting and very intriguing reading of the dice. Buenas noches. [‘Good night’ in Spanish] I’ll probably be back next Tuesday.” *If I don’t get run over by a red-light-running car like that guy on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of my apartment building, that is. Man, did that car send him sailing through the air. Brutal. Ughhhh.*

I got up to catch the N train back to downtown. My thoughts as I waited at the tram stop: *Divining the future. Such an old game. If it were only as easy as rolling dice. She seems to really believe in it, though. I won’t burst her bubble. That would be cruel and so unnecessary. When I see her next time, I’ll just tell her that I’m still trying to figure out the units of her interpretation.*

In 1999 I would get married to the wrong woman; in 2011 I would get married to the right one.

## 26. **The Right Triangle** (June 2014)

Got time for one more tale from Sidle on N (a perpetually fogged-in, tiny, dive-to-the-depths-of-knowhere [*sic*] bar in the Outer Sunset district of San Francisco)? It's just a short one. I sure-really hope that when/if you whisper 'Oui' (Yes in French) that no eavesdropper assumes than you are now referring to yourself in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural, as they say that it is much worse than referring to oneself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. And that Mike guy, well, he should know us. *I can sense that one falling flatter than last year's cooler-compacted pancake.*

Ok, enough with the preliminary noodling. I'll behave from here on out. Well, maybe.

It was a late Friday afternoon in mid-September of '92. No, not 1892 at a Haverlys minor league baseball game – a century of change and re-arrange later than that in the city by the bay.

Dash, the ever-hip, late-20-something, Amerasian M-W-F bartender at Sidle on N, was chatting on his clunky early-1990s bag-phone with his girlfriend Dish. (You know, you can't make these nicknames up – well, maybe you can. A couple named Dash and Dish, eyes will kid yew in knots.)

I had just third-sipped my off-brand dark beer (today's \$2 impromptu, unadvertised, unannounced special), when Dash hung up his two-pound, scraped-up, bandage-taped, cellular phone by attaching it to a side of the large, dusty, black battery bag. <clunk>

Dash was excited and all a-smile. He quickly and proudly made an announcement: "Dak is going to do it! Yes, Dak is

really going to do it!" *Dak? Never heard him mention a Dak before.*

"Do what?" I asked. "And, who in the whole wide bay area is Dak?"

"He's going to soar, man. Dak is my computer-whiz friend. He aced the SAT. Well, at least the math and logic parts." *Wow, a little bit better than my 960.*

"Very impressive, Dash. So, you've got a compu-genius [*sic*] friend. I would think that is very beneficial to have in this new digital age."

"I think so, too, Mike. He will be getting his master's degree from UC Berkeley in only five years." *Not too shabby. A bright diode there.*

"Ok, and what will he be doing with all that brain power, Dash?" *Binary fusion?*

"Dak is going to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge and soar away!" *So, the ultra-smart one has an exotic death wish. How sublime.*

"Lovely. Just lovely, Dash. Tell him to wait a few years, and then he can be suicide number 1,000. That way his name will be on a bronze plaque at Fort Point. Oh yeah, and then his name will also be the winning answer to trivial bar bets."

"No, he's not planning on committing suicide, Mike."

"Well, that's what just about always happens when you jump off that bridge. Less than one in a hundred survive the fall. The bridge's road deck is 245 feet above the bay's surface. Mean sea-level, of course." *Mean sea-level. Too much.*



“Yeah, I know, I know. But, really, Dak has it all figured out. He’s mega-smart. Top of the league.” *Too smart for this life?*

“Dash, the bridge leapers reach speeds approaching 80 miles per hour. At those speeds, the water’s surface is like concrete. Dried, cured, hard concrete.”

“He knows that. Dak told me that he’s going to take off from the top of the North Tower. He’s done the calculations and has come up with the right triangle.” *The right triangle?*

“Well, Dash, his chances of surviving just went from 1% to zilch. Those towers are over 700 feet tall. Seven hundred and forty-six feet to be exact.”

“How do you know the exact height of the towers and all these other bridge specs?”

“I took a free brochure from the bridge’s gift shop yesterday. My memory chip has a soft spot for random facts.”

Dash then handed me a white business card with a right triangle on it in black ink. (Click [here](#) to see graphic.)

> [return mark] Thanks for coming back. You know, I was beginning to wonder.

I noted the numerical amounts and terms like *Glide Path*, *Top of GGB North Tower*, *SF Bay surface* and *Kirby Cove Beach*.

“Wait, did you say take off?” *What kind of stunt is this?*

“I sure did. He’s going to have wings, Mike.”

“His arms will be torn off, Dash. Has your genius-pal not done his homework properly? The human body can’t take those kinds of stresses. We’re not birds.”

“He’s done all the math, even triple-checked it. Almost all of the stress is taken by an ultra-lightweight, carbon-fiber, slightly curved, 18-foot beam that will go across his back, behind his shoulder blades. The wing material is some new synthetic, composite material. It all weighs less than nine pounds.”

“You’re kidding me.” *This is nutzoid. [sic]*

“Man, I have seen his contraption. It’s real, dude. And, it’s really very light, yet super-strong. He’s already done some testing in the Marin Headlands at night. But please, don’t tell anyone.”

“Don’t worry; I won’t. I wouldn’t want to short-circuit the upcoming spectacle.”

“Mike, he can fly with these wings, I tell ya. It’s no joke. It really works. Well, fly is not exactly correct; glide is a better word. He told me that he glided for over 500 feet off a 200-foot-high knoll just a few nights ago.”

“Ok, Dash, let’s just say that I believe that his math is right and his glide-wings will work. That still leaves a big problem: How does he transport an 18-foot-long apparatus to the top of the North Tower without being seen?”

“Inside help, dude. He has a cousin who works in the bridge maintenance division. He will have a key.”

“But, he can’t just walk down the bridge’s sidewalk with that 18-foot wingspan. Hundreds of passing motorists and pedestrians will see him and report him to the police as a suspected terrorist.”

“He’s way ahead of you, Mike. It’s no problem. It all folds up into six three-foot-long sections. He’ll re-assemble it in the top of the tower, just under the hatch.” *Just under the hatch? What?!*

“If your Dak pulls this off and lives, I’ll give you five Malloy-approved lottery numbers.” *Mike knows Malloy?*

“Only five?” Dash laughed. “Listen, Mike, he already has a special duffel bag for it with a customized logo: SoarFree.” *I’ve heard everything now. This place never fails to amaze.*

“Dash, your test-genius friend is too smart for his own, dumb, good health.”

Dash was unfazed by my remark. “Oh, I forgot to tell you this: He wants me to film his epic Golden Gate glide from Battery Spencer.”

“Oh, so you will be the videographer who documents this poor guy’s death. I’d be careful with that video tape, Dash; you could get called into a courtroom.”

“Relax, Mike; it’s going to work out fine. Dak is an all-world genius; he’s not some corn-fed rube.” *Where did that come from?*

“Is he an epik [sic] with a k all-leaguer?” *I think my American friend has had enough drink for today. I will politely cut him off. He won’t miss the alcohol. I think that he has ingested some of those ‘granules of grandeur’ that are going around.*

“Mike, my crazy art-friend, he has done stunts like this before. Many times. And, get this, his record is perfect. No mishaps. No accidents. No injuries. No, not even a scratch. His preparation is always ultra-meticulous.”

“Ok, ok, Dash. Just for non-argument’s sake, I’ll believe every single word that you have just said. However, there is still a problem. A big all-engulfing problem. I’ll give you a hint: three letters, begins with the letter F.”

“Fog?” *Wow! He guessed it on the first try. Just like in a short story.*

“Yes, fog, Dash. The seemingly ever-present, summertime, pea-soup fog. How will he be able to see where he is going? And, how on Earth will you be able to film him in flight?”

“I hear you loud and clear. But, have you noticed that the fog is getting thinner, and is sometimes not even present at dusk anymore?”

“Color me oblivious to it.”

“There have even been some sunsets this week where you could actually see the Pacific Ocean.”

“All the way out to Seal Rocks.” I guffawed.

“No, not the surf. I mean like seven miles out. We’re getting out of the dense summer fog season.”

“So, he is just waiting for a fog-free evening?”

“Fog-free and wind-free. A calm twilight.”

I swilled down the last two ounces in my dark brown beer bottle and got up to leave. “Dash, call me the day that Dak decides to take his leap of faith.”

“I will.”

“Give me at least four hours of lead time.”

“You got it, man. You still want my sister’s phone number?”

“No, I already have it.” *What?! He does?*

“You fucking dog! Get the hell out of here.” He was laughing.

“Just one last question before I go: Have you seen Malloy [a character in the novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco* and in the short stories *A Search for Sidle on N* and *Vermont Street*] lately?”

“He was in last Tuesday. He told me that before he won the lottery he won the treble.” *What?*

“The treble? Isn’t that a European soccer term that refers to winning three trophies or cups in one season?”

“Yeah, I think so. But in Mr. Malloy’s case, his treble was divorce, foreclosure and bankruptcy. And in that order.”  
*Ouch!*

“I wouldn’t call that winning.”

“He said that it set him up to win the lottery.”

“Malloy is just one lucky bastard. One very amusing old loon. I love how he rationalizes his most propitious stroke of chance, and makes it seem like anyone can win if they follow his golden precepts. Lovely lunacy.”

“Yep, yep, yep,” Dash said, mimicking Malloy perfectly.

I exited with a grin. However, when I looked across Judah Street, I saw the back of an N train climbing the incline.  
*Drats! Just missed it. Well, can’t make them all.*

Next, I decided to walk down to Lava Peach for a cappuccino to pass the wait time for the next train.

Business was brisk at Judah & La Playa. The strong coffee was just what I needed. (I was running on feral fumes.)

I then looked around for something to read and found a folded sheet of paper in a basket with a story on it – one very similar to the one that you are reading right now.

An idea flashed across my interior screen: *Maybe I should do some zany little quadra-folds like this someday.*

I finished my cup o' joe as the MUNI streetcar came into view. *The fog is thinning, just like Dash said.*

The ride back to Market Street was pleasantly uneventful, except for the man who kept looking for something on the floor. *Maybe mentally ill.*

Days passed with me and Sidle on N in separate worlds. To be honest, I forgot about the upcoming Dak event.

Then at three on Sunday afternoon, October 4<sup>th</sup>, Dash called me. Tonight was the night.

I met Dash at Battery Spencer at 7:07 PM. With my binoculars I saw the be-winged Dak atop the North Tower. *Wow! There he is with his wing-set. It looks like he is really going to do this. Is he going to fall like a winged boulder?*

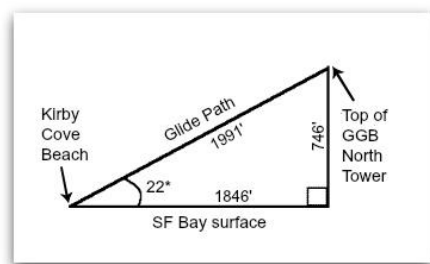
Then he leapt. He glided like a giant black raptor. He curved a little and quickly came towards us. Fast. Very fast. And, he zipped right by us with a tight-lipped grin. *Wow! It's working. He's zooming right along!*

Dak, however, overshot Kirby Cove Beach and disappeared into a fog bank to the west. *Where'd he go?*

Dash and I never found him that evening. We just assumed that he glided a few hundred yards out to sea. Since he had a wet suit and life jacket on, we figured that he would be ok

and float back in. And tomorrow he would tell us the astonishing details.

However, later, on the 10:00 PM local news, the Chinese American anchorwoman led off the broadcast with: “Wing-suited man crashes into Point Bonita Lighthouse and dies.”



Click [here](#) to return to story.

## 27. **Mysterieau Returns** (July 2014)

Mysterieau – that borderline surrealist, that oddly intriguing raconteur, that all-laughter-barred comedian, that strangely lame magician – returned to the stage after pumping the well for some new-liquidity ideas. (This is the same character featured in the 29K-word novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco*.) No, it wasn't the ghost of deceased-a-year-ago Tai; it was his 31-year-old, of similar physique and mindset, just-as-eccentric second cousin.

Quang had left the perfectly-perplexing purple outfit back in San Francisco, and thus decided to make his bluer-than-blue debut. It was a one-nighter in Carson City, Nevada at a tiny, third-rate casino that was once a gas station (and still smelled like it). The new hands-hidden-by-extra-long-suit-sleeves, high-flying-in-place, Halloween-skull-masked one took the low stage at 11:11 PM on a hot Thursday night in June of 1993, following a strange act that involved cactus ingestion. *Think I'll need to get a room. Seeing strings in the air now.*

I was able to get a seat in a near-front-of-stage nook. I then clicked on my trusty analog audio recorder. What follows is the transcript of this Mysterieau replacement's equally-as-odd-as-the-original, just-as-chaotic performance.

“Hello Carson. Hello there, Carson City. O Carson City, the capital city that no one east of the Mississippi ever guesses correctly. No one but me, that is. Yes, I knew Virginia City was not the capital of Nevada, nor Las Vegas or Reno. And, no, Virginia; there's no Virginia City in the Old Dominion.”



[a 12-second pause with the sounds of beer bottles being set down on yellow-pine tables, chairs being repositioned, and several people talking loudly]

“Ahem. [clears throat] Hello one. Hello two. Hello three. Hello to all of yas. I’m Mysterieau. Mysterieau 2.0, actually. But, let’s not go into that. Let’s just stay right here for now.”

[a 10-second pause with someone in the audience belching]

“The name. What’s in a name, you are tempted to ask? Well, the name Mysterieau derives from that mysterious water-like fluid siphoned from the brains of the body-dead.” *Oh, dear.*

[no acknowledgment from the audience, just an uneasy six-second pause with continued loud chatter]

“Listen, could we bring it down to a dull roar in here? [the conversations begin to cease] Dank u. [‘Thank you’ in Dutch] Dank u wel. [‘Thank you very much’ in Dutch] That’s Dutch, ya know. I played Amsterdam last month. No, I think it was last week. Well, whenever it was, it was epik [*sic*] with a hard-azz k. You can be sure of that. Well, all the way until I ended up in a k-nal. [*sic*] I know, that’s what they all say. Anyway, how are we tonight? Already partially aroused? Your mentality, that is. This is a PG-13 act.”

[no reply from the audience, just an awkward eight-second pause with some whispering]

“Ah, that Gouda? Listen, I just got back from Holland. You know that place? [silence] Ok, the longer, more proper word is Nederland, or Netherlands. It houses Amsterdam. Let me tell ya, it was mega. Oranje [Dutch for orange] mania. Everyone and everything in orange, or oranje as they say between windmills. Ja. [Yes in Dutch] Orange shirts. Orange

faces. Orange hair. Orange weed. Orange brownies. Orange mushrooms. Orange you glad you're here?"

[a few groans from the audience, and then a nervous female's stunted chuckle]

Neo-Mysterieau remained motionless and speechless for 11 over-dramatic seconds. [an unknown object hits the floor]

"Yes, it was all going swimmingly. Then, sure enough, I woke up in a canal with a tulip in my lapel. That was the zenith and nadir of the gig in a jist-shell. [sic] Anyway, it's great to be back in the States, even if it is Nevada."

[booing, then some laughter]

"Hey, I'm just *halving* a laugh, so that we can have another half-chortle later when the doldrums settle in. Please, don't be so touchy. At least not yet. I'm jest [sic] jesting. We can have some smart fun tonight. We're up to this. We can gain a shallowing in-depth perspective. Why, you ask under your bourbon-saturated breaths? Because I joust-lanced former Agent 69. Yeah, that old canker-cranker. Well, he's in a ditch now and very quiet." *What in the world?*

[a loud female sigh followed by three seconds of silence]

The masked one continued. "Listen, have I asked you to listen lately? [no reply] We're going to have fun tonight, beginning right now! I'm going to retell a conversation that I overheard in Amsterdam's Centraal Station on platform 5a. Open your years [sic] and close your traps."

[a nine-second pause filled with the sound of a chair screeching on the concrete-slab floor]

“An American tourist, a white male in his mid-20s with brown hair, mustachioed and goateed, was talking to this raven-haired Romanian lass who was in her early 20s. At first I thought the dude was simply trying to pick her up. However, after a while, I realized that it was something très étrange [‘very strange’ in French] as they say in Marseille in May.”

[Neo-Mysterieau coughing]

“I sure picked a bad day to start snorting Comet®. Just joking. We’re cleaned of cleansers tonight. Congranulations. [sic] Ok, back to our overheard Amsterdam train-station conversation.”

[groans in the audience]

A nearby patron quietly asks, “Are you ready to leave now, Jane?”

Neo-Mysterieau then continued with his Amsterdam tale. “Ameridude [sic] says: ‘My coworker in the US uses hairspray on her armpits.’ And then Romanalass [sic] says: ‘Does she shave?’ Ameridude: ‘Not when it’s hot, humid and sticky; never in such frizzying [sic] weather.’ Romanalass: ‘Hot weather makes me sleepy and think of home.’ Ameridude: ‘Such a slow, sunny, lazy Monday. And, it’s not halfway yet.’ Romanalass: ‘Sunny enough for a bathing suit, but if I put it on, I know it would rain.’ Ameridude: ‘That’s mighty funny, honey, on National Nude Day.’ Romanalass: ‘What the hell! Why, you crazy American!’ Ameridude: ‘Forehead to soon meet wall. I’m sorry. Please re-mark my last remark.’ Romanalass: ‘It’s ok. Just hurry up with Friday. Did I tell you that I hate my job? That’s why I’m here, unexpectedly passing time with you.’ Ameridude: ‘Well, I’m ready for Friday, too. Do you think that Holland will win the

World Cup?’ Romanalass: ‘That’s next year, you dunce!’ Ameridude: ‘Oh yeah, that’s right.’ Romanalass: ‘You got too high back there, didn’t you?’ Ameridude: ‘Back in the States, we have that *Git ‘er done* saying.’ Romanalass: ‘Get what done?’ Ameridude: ‘I forget now. Maybe that sweet sixteen.’ Romanalass: ‘That’s called the knockout round, fool. This is just like watching paint flake.’ Ameridude: ‘Everything dries up and blows away.’ Romanalass: ‘It’s life, man. And, I’m here on this train platform in Centraal Station talking to you.’ Ameridude: ‘Yeah, you’ve already said that. Hungry for some lunch? Maybe ManaMatzoBallinsome [*sic*] chicken noodle soup?’ Romanalass: ‘Never heard of that kind.’ Ameridude: ‘It’s made with the excessive ball sweat of the sous-chef.’ Romanalass: ‘Foul! That’s way out of line. Why do you Americans have to get so vulgar?’ Ameridude: ‘Ok, how about pull my finger and we go to a pasty nether region?’ Romana – ”

“Enough of this crap!” an annoyed, late-50-something, white businessman in a dark suit exclaimed from the third row. “This shit sucks! Only a demented stoner would find this verbal dung amusing.”

Mysterieau II looked up at the ceiling, and then back down to his note card. The recitation continued.

“Romanalass: ‘Nah, too boring. I’m hot and tired. Please stop with the mumbling dog face. It’s a serial loser.’ Ameridude: ‘As bad as Mysterieau Deux the other night?’ Romanalass: ‘Duh! Even when he was good, he was bad. And rude like you.’ Ameridude: ‘Ok, I’ll let you in on a secret: My life sucks. But, my friends saved me. And, a big thanks to my newfound god.’ Romanalass: ‘You’re one whacked-out

yank. [chiefly British slang for an American] All I want is sleep, sleep, and more sleep. Where's my bed? Can I lie against your chest? Nothing sexual intended.' Ameridude: 'Sure, I've paid my bills. I own this shirt. Rest your precious head, my train-waiting Euro damsel in heat distress.' Romanalass: 'You Americans need to learn that life is about sacrifices.' Ameridude: 'Can I pay in fifties?' Romanalass: 'Did you just cop a feel of my breast? You bastard!' Ameridude: 'Glisten, [*sic*] doll. I admit it: I drank too much last night and I got all smoked-up this morning in a coughing house [slang for a Dutch coffeehouse where marijuana is available] to mask the hangover. I saw you sitting alone on this railway platform. Trust me, my breath is usually not this bad; my words, not usually this coarse.' Romanalass: 'You kind of remind me of that artist ... oh, what was his name? Wait, it's coming to me ... Galerie Parcouer!' Ameridude: 'Darn, I was so hoping for something other.' Ok, folks, we're only about 22% of the way through this. Plenty more to go."

[loud booing, and then the sounds of many footsteps as Mysterieau Nouveau is silent for nine seconds]

"Ok, ok, I'll stop! I'll halt the overheard train-station dialogue. Message received loud and clear. Though, such a converstation [*sic*] it was and will forever be. Hey, must coin them when you can. It's what someone said. A living someone, that is. Now a haunter [*sic*] of gatherers. Ghastly pocket change for a sparse delusional fantasy. Procured on the cheap. Skewered in the deep. Woah, I don't want all of you to leave. Well, not at once. It's bad form. And, it could be dangerous. Sure, it's highly insulting. Not to me, but to the proprietor. He's not a bad bald guy. He has a nice wife, son and daughter. We all met for drinks backstage. Beforehand.

He made this one-star-casino-suspiciously-attached-to-a-two-star-hotel what it is today. With his bare hands. Under the roulette wheel. Before he had an aversion to gloves, it would seem. And, really, I don't want anyone to die from a stampede to the exit door. We've already been named in more than enough lawsuits as it is. There's a word for your feeling, but the required letters have since escaped from my roaming [*sic*] alphabet."

[some tapping sounds, and then a female whistles during the 12-second pause]

"We've now reached the post-monotony phase of the show where people start smiling again. Yes, imagine that. It really does happen. And, why is that all of you ask after a longwinded, torturous, going-nowhere-fast, barely honed harangue of a monologue?" [silence]

[the sound of Mysterieau le Second walking back and forth on the creaking wooden stage, and then he stamps a foot down hard]

"Why, it's about money! Money, money, money. Do I have your fiscal attention now? [still silence] Oh yes, we are going to send someone home tonight with a mighty wad of cash. Maybe more than one. Maybe all ... [counting of the audience begins] 35 of you! Yeah, you are liking this performance now. Am I right?" [near total silence]

Then a lone faint "Yes" is uttered by a female in the back.

"So, you're just a drug-addled con artist," an Asian man in a white T-shirt shouted from the 4<sup>th</sup> row. "Folks, this is just a grade-C hustle. Hold onto your wallets and purses."

However, Mysterieau the 2nd was unfazed. He just nodded to the heckler and continued.

“Now, can we all agree that there are 366 calendar dates on which a person could be born on this oblate spheroid called Earth, including Leap Day, February 29<sup>th</sup>? [silence for three seconds then some murmuring] Ok, I’ll take that as a covert ‘Yes’ vote. Now, do you think that anyone in this room shares your birthday? [no reply] I know, you guys and gals don’t want to show off your brilliance. Well, I’m going to pass around some blank, white, anyone’s-business cards. If you would be so kind as to write your birthday on one side and your first name and last name initial on the back that would be most insightful.”

New Mysterieau then hands a white, middle-aged, blue-hatted lady a stack of said cards. She then takes one and commences the pass-around. Fifty-seven seconds later everyone has a card and is scribbling down what he has asked for.

Suddenly, a portly, gray-to-white-haired, cowboy-hatted Caucasian man in jeans yells, “Hold on tight, everyone; this is that birthday-paradox sham. With the 35 of us here, he has an eight-in-ten chance of taking our money.”

Mysterieau<sup>2</sup> then replies, “Well then, kind sire, [*sic*] you can bet the reverse.”

“You’re on!” the cowboy fires back. “A thousand bucks says that at least two people in here have the same birthday. I’ve seen this before.”

Mysterieau version 2 then lays out the 35 white business cards on a card table in front of the stage, birthday sides up.

The cowboy is surprised to see that none of the birthdates match. He becomes enraged. "You rigged this! You're a charlatan! Another mendacious mountebank!" *Mountebank?*

Mysterieu<sup>2</sup>, seemingly unruffled by the outburst, just says, "Security, kindly escort this boor to the great outdoors."

A rotund, gray-uniformed Mexican security guard then removes the man from the room.

Neo-Mysterieu then claps his gloved hands together. "Now, anyone up for a shell game?"



## 28. Bangkok in Salisbury (July 2014)

So, there we were in downtown Salisbury, North Carolina on a hot, yet dry, July afternoon in 2014. Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) were hungry for some Asian fare, when lo and behold, we spied a Thai restaurant on the corner of Innes and Lee.

Bangkok Downtown was the name on the glass pane of the old green door of the renovated, three-story, 90-year-old building. Not being sure if they did late Saturday lunch, I pulled gingerly on the old brass door handle. The door opened easily with nary a creak. We entered the cool foyer.

A Thai hostess quickly had us seated. There was only one other couple in there at the time, both buried in their plates. *Well, they sure seem to love the food here.*

The World Cup soccer match between the Netherlands and Costa Rica was running on the LCD screen, high overhead. The original, white, raised-relief, tin Queen Anne ceiling tiles had been cleaned up and retouched very nicely. In fact, the whole building had been expertly redone.

Soon a diminutive Thai waitress arrived at our table in traditional attire. We ordered green and red curry dishes. Then the waitress promptly disappeared into the kitchen.

I refocused on the soccer game, while Monique continued to study the menu. Five minutes later, we ordered.

Halftime arrived along with our plates. A scoreless draw at the break. Nil-nil. *Jeez, I hope van Persie can score in the second half.*

The food smelled heavenly and got the wall elephant's nod of approval. Monique began to feast as I pondered the first half.

"Van Persie needs to get his head into the game."

"No dolphin dive yet, 33?"

"No, nothing even close, Monique. Though, Robben, as usual, is playing like a man on a mission."

"Well, maybe he can score in the second half."

"Yeah, maybe," I said as I looked around for the restroom.

I got up and headed for a narrow back hallway. I had gulped down a quart of ice water while watching the tense first half. I left a *Gold* card (a coupon to purchase my e-novel *Gold, a summer story* for just 99 cents) in the men's room in a location that probably won't lend itself to being discovered for several months to several years. I'll just leave it at that. Well, for now, as it was. (Not sure what that means, either, but I seemed to think it was clever at the time.)

Once back at our table, I devoured the vegetarian red curry dish. It was – in a commonly used English word – delicious. *Good, tasty, healthy chow.*

Monique was now almost done with her green curry bowl. She seemed to like it as much as I liked mine. Her fork and spoon were nonstop.

Soon the game recommenced as another pair of middle-age couples arrived and were seated on both sides of us with a table between. *I'm glad they didn't cram us all awkwardly together. This spacing is perfect for intentional overhearings.*

The goateed 60-ish Caucasian man to my right had a casual interest in the match, looking up at the screen from time to time. I'm not sure if he had a rooting interest, though. Since this wasn't a sports bar, I curbed my enthusiasm whenever the Dutch team had a scoring chance, or whenever they were close to being scored upon. Nonetheless, the bearded man to my right picked up on my interest in the game. *Now it's time to have a little fun. Time to click on the digital audio recorder. I, or someone else, might utter a fine line, and I might forget it when write-up time comes along.*

The game seemed to slow down. Costa Rica was being defensively cautious, but would still launch surprise counterattacks. Suddenly, Robben led another break down the pitch. A beautiful cross to Robin van Persie gets misplayed. *Darn it! Wake up!*

"Did you see that, lovely Agent 32? Van Persie almost tripped over his own two feet. He can play so great and then ... well, I don't know." *Klutz! [sic]*

"You were just talking him up the other week, telling me how he was going to score at least twenty goals with Manchester United next season with fellow countryman Louis van Gaal as manager, and how Liverpool were in deep trouble."

"I know, I know, I know. It's a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately World Cup kind of thing, I guess."

"Don't take it too seriously, Parkaar; [my ailing alias] it's not the United States."

"Yeah, you're right, Monique."

"Do you even know any Dutch, 33?"

“Niet veel [‘not much’ in Dutch] I would say in Rotterdam.”

“Neat feel?”

“Yes, later, 32.”

“What in the world are you talking about, 33?”

“Gosh, Sneijder just hit the crossbar! Dutch luck, I tell ya. Just dumb Dutch luck.”

“Dutch luck?”

“Believe me, 32; you don’t want it. Certainly not in the finals.”

The second half ended with no score. Two 15-minute periods of extra time were played as we sipped our Singha lager beers. Still, no team could score.

“It’s PKs now, 32.”

“PKs?”

“Penalty kicks.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s a crap shoot. Throw a coin in the air.”

“I think Costa Rica wanted it to get to this stage, 33.”

“Me, too, 32. And, they have succeeded in that.”

All eight of us in the main dining hall watched the TV screen as the nerve-racking round of penalty kicks began. Replacement goaltender Tim Krull made two big saves and the Netherlands won 4-3 to advance. *Maybe there is an oranje [orange in Dutch] demigod after all.*

As the match neared conclusion, I had a strange sensation of seeing all of us from above – from those old ceiling tiles. I

saw four random couples at a Thai restaurant on a Saturday afternoon in the hot piedmont of North Carolina, watching a hot soccer game in Brazil, while their food got cold and their drinks got warm. I saw nine translucent numbers hovering around us (one for the waitress):

2,836,042,002		4,045,823,905		3,035,012,064
4,212,257,093		2,901,084,931		3,215,913,416
2,967,391,745		4,404,204,357		4,503,026,198

“You look lost in thought, 33. What are you thinking about?”

“Numbers, 32. Unique human numbers.”

“Goals scored? Those unique human numbers?”

“You could say that. The human score on Earth. And when someone dies, their number evaporates. A lot of gaps in the sequence.”

“Did you quick-drink another Singha beer while I was in the ladies’ room, Parkaar?”

“No, just more ice water. Did you remember to leave a *Gold* card in there?”

“Why, of course, 33.”

“Salamat, [‘Thank you’ in Tagalog] Monique. Who knows, maybe someday someone will find it and want to check out my novel. Maybe they will buy it and read it, and actually like it enough to tell a friend who will ... blah-blah-blah, and so on, and sew [*sic*] on with an endless thread.” *He’s definitely recording.*

“You have that darn audio recorder on, don’t you?”

“Ja.” [Yes in Dutch] *I knew it.*

And then from the table to the right, the older gentleman with a slight Scouse accent: "That was some match."

"It sure was," I replied.

"But, don't worry, mate; Robin van Persie won't torment Liverpool next season. It will be the usual villains: Rooney and Mata."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"I'll give you a hint for planting business cards. I did some of that in my younger days. You want to place them in books, newspapers, weeklies, etc."

"That sounds logical. Thanks for the tip."

"Everyone has to use the bathroom, but not everyone is a reader."

"I get what you're saying. That's some sage advice, sir. Thanks a lot. I'll keep that in mind."

"No problem. Have a nice evening."

"Likewise. And, go Reds!"

"Always!"

Monique and I got up to leave. We paid our bill and wandered outside.

"Monique, we got eavesdropped upon this time," I said to her on a vacant block of sidewalk.

"Smartly so, though," she replied.

"Yes, very smartly so."

We rounded the corner and looked up at the sign on the old Hardiman Building.

“Ah, they’re still leasing office space,” I said.

“A psecret psociety office in Psalisbury?” [*sic*] Monique suggested.

“Psalisbury with a silent P, 32?”

“Why, of course, 33.”

“I’ll have to run it by, Ernie.”

“Yeah, you do that, Parkaar.”

We both laughed like impish schoolkids.

## 29. **Airported to Knowhere** (August 2014)

So, there I was, standing in the check-in line at CLT (Charlotte-Douglas International Airport) on a warm, bright, sunny September morning in 2010. I was going to see my fiancée at the time, Monique (Agent 32), in the Philippines. The airport mood seemed to be one of a yawn time ago. *Have I used that expression recently?*

There was an older gentleman behind me. He was a white guy with white, large-frame, oval glasses, maybe 70 years old, sporting a white tank top with some Florida beach logo on it. He was wearing white tennis shorts with white socks and white tennis shoes. *I guess his favorite attire color is white.*

I had a large piece of no-longer-rolling (the wheels had become immovable feet) luggage behind me. Both of my hands were carrying items: a laptop, duffel bag, airline tickets, et and cetera. *Et and cetera. I wonder if anyone will find that mildly amusing.*

As the line would move up a few feet, I would have to turn and drag the red canvas-covered, three-foot luggage cube, while trying not to lose control of the other items. The older Floridian behind me – who had no luggage – noticed me struggling with this at times.

“Hey, why don’t you just let me inch your luggage forward?” he very politely suggested.

“Sure,” I consented. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”



“No problem. Glad to assist.”

He then began to slide the monstrous piece of luggage for me as the line advanced by pushing it with his bony knees and shoe toes. This continued for about twelve minutes in silence until we were next to be called at the ticket counter.

A white, blonde-haired, mid-30s-appearing, female airline employee looked at the front of the line. “Next,” she firmly announced.

I walked up to the counter with my ticket and passport in my right hand. She grabbed the items and scanned them. Next, a boarding pass was perfunctorily printed.

“Any luggage to check, sir?”

“Yes, two pieces.”

I then turned to get my colossal baggage from the older guy. But, I didn't see him ... anywhere. And, I didn't see my extra-large piece of cube luggage, either. A wave of panic rushed through me. *Oh, krap! [sic] The old fokker [sic] flew off with it! He scammed me. How naïve am I? I broke rule no. 1 of airports: Never lose sight of your luggage. Now I'll have to buy Monique a new gift and set of clothes. Darn! This effing [sic] sucks rotting moose eggs. Moose eggs?*

I ran towards the nearest concourse gate. I made a left turn to see what appeared to be the front door of an old American east-coast railway station. I opened the door, and it was like it was the 1890s inside. *What the fock! [sic] Am I in the Twilight Zone? Am I dreaming all of this? If so, wake up!*

There were about a dozen people inside going about their business in dress of that time period, but no one paid me any attention. It was like they couldn't see me – like I was a ghost. *I feel like I've fallen into one of my surreal short stories ... and I can't get out.*

I retreated back towards the airport's main concourse in a state of shock. I rounded the corner and I was suddenly back in the 21<sup>st</sup> century once again. It was the same September day in 2010, just two and a half minutes later. *What the hell was that back there? Is a portion of that corner a wormhole? Or, have I lost my mind? Did someone put something in my coffee at Starbucks this morning? Or, did I? No, I'm out of those 'granules de grandeur' now. Maybe a flashback? If so, I hope there are no more. Well, not for a while. I don't want to flip out on that long trans-Pacific flight.*

I kept searching the airport, concourse by concourse (and stayed in the present time). Then I saw him, Mr. Florida, in an eating area in Concourse E. My red piece of Titanic-size luggage appeared to be beside him. *That lousy scoundrel. What a worthless thief! He must be a pro at this. A veteran airport pilferer.*

I rushed up to him. "Why did you leave with my luggage?! Are you some kind of professional airport thief?"

"Gosh, no, sir. Most certainly not. I am going to get it checked for you, so that you don't have to pay the overage fees." *Overage fees?*

"What do you mean that you are going to get it checked for me? You can't get my luggage checked for me. You don't

even know my name. And besides, you can't get luggage checked in this area of the airport. How in the world did you get this through the security checkpoint?"

He didn't immediately reply. Mr. Florida just smiled demurely and softly chuckled for about ten seconds. Then he tilted his head and spoke. "Relax. You are in a lucid dream phase, mi amigo. ['my friend' in Spanish] Just go with it. Ride it out."

And with that remark he seemed to vanish into the simulated wood grain on the table top. Even though I now knew that I was dreaming, I felt the need to try to make the flight. *I'm going to play this dream out. Going to get my money's worth. Let's see where this dream leads ... or crashes.*

I wandered out of the food court, looking for a flight departure screen. Then I found one. However, as I tried to focus on my flight number, the digits would change before I could read the gate number. It was maddening. I remember thinking in the dream: *Should I just wake up and terminate this now-very-annoying dream?*

Ah, but I decided to play along with this Kafka-esque scenario. I finally found my way to the proper gate. I had all of my luggage and belongings with me. I was going to make this dream-flight after all. I was going to see my asawa [wife in Cebuano] -to-be. But, first I had to use the bathroom.

After a short walk down a concourse, I entered a door-less men's restroom. I came up to what appeared to be an unoccupied toilet stall. I pulled gingerly on the old brass door handle. I then realized that I had used a line from another short story, from the one that was lying on top of the

commode's tank. *This dream is getting too weird, even for me. It is inside-outing my mind – crenulating [sic] my cerebrum and crumpling my cortices.*

I re-emerged from the restroom. An older Filipina with piercing beady eyes immediately wagged her finger at me and began to scold me.

“I saw you in the bathroom with the pinay!” [a female from the Philippines] She was emphatic. Emphatically coo-coo. *The poor old bird has lost her marbles.*

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

She didn't reply. She turned her head down. Then, after about five seconds, she quietly walked away, like she had been shamed. *She must have gone mad somewhere back there. She must have fallen out of the nest and bumped her noggin pretty bad.*

Suddenly, there was an announcement blasting down from the overhead public-address speakers: “Your attention, please. Northwest flight 71 has been cancelled. Please consider taking a train.” *Taking a train? What the hell? A train from North America to Asia? This dream is hopeless. I might as well wake up now. It's probably about time to get ready for work anyway.*

Then Monique bumped my left leg and I awoke. Still startled by the bizarre dream, I checked my surroundings. *Ok, I'm in my bed next to my wife in our east Charlotte bedroom. All is ok. What a crazy dream that was. I'll have to tell Monique about it when she wakes up.*

I sluggishly pushed myself out of bed and got dressed for work. I went to the bathroom to shave. Then I returned to the bedroom and gently woke up Monique.

“Well, I’m off to work, honey.”

“Will you be taking the car or riding the bike?” she asked, still rubbing her eyes.

“The bike. It’s 61 degrees [Fahrenheit; 16° Celsius] and dry outside. It should be a decent ride into work.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want to take the car?”

“No, I’ll leave it here with you. I need the calorie burn. And, riding the bike clears my head. Driving to work is no joy – just motorized vehicle mayhem.”

“Ok, do as you like, Mr. Tour de Pants.” *What?*

“Tour de Pants? That’s a good pun for this early in the morning, mahal. [love in Tagalog] Very impressive. My Agent 32 is already in her creative mode.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want to take the train?” *Train?*

“What train?”

“Oh, that’s right; there is no train yet to where we live. It must have been a dream.”

“Did your dream feature an old white guy in white shorts, wearing a white tank-top shirt?”

“No, but it did feature an old pinoy [a man from the Philippines] behind me on that flight from Manila to San Francisco. It was that guy that we talked about before.”

“Oh, the guy that had notes and signatures from previous adjacent airline passengers from the past three decades.”

“Yes, him. I wrote a little note in his scrapbook and signed it. He had like three volumes in the dream.”

“The old pinoy has got enough for a novel now.”

“Yeah, probably so.”

“So, how did your dream end, Monique?”

“With some guy kicking my right leg.”

We both laughed. She sat up in the bed.

“No, it ended with that crazy old bird. You know, remember that old Filipina from the church?”

“How could I ever forget her finger waggling?”

“I know. I wish that I could forget it, but it’s etched into my brain now. Well, anyway, the old pinoy with the scrapbook asks her to leave a note and sign and date it.”

“Ok. Does she oblige?”

“No. She just screams: ‘I saw you on the other plane!’ She was hysterical.”

“Did she pull out the right index finger?”

“Oh, yes; it was in full-waggle mode.”

“What did the older pinoy do?”

He just smiled at her. Then she stepped down and walked back up the aisle. She didn't appear in the dream again.”

“Not even in the bathroom?” *He sure asks the oddest questions.*

“No, not even in the bathroom, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] I know that you're recording this.”

“Yep.”

### 30. **Lucky Strikes** (August 2014)

After eating a scrumptious soup-and-bread lunch – and strategically placing some *GOLD, a summer story* (my e-novel) quadra-fold excerpts – at the Panera Bread on US 52 in Salisbury (NC, USA), we, Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33), went to visit my dad at the VA Hospital.

He was doing much better. The above-the-knee amputation had been called off. He was in a very jovial way, telling one joke after another.

“Dad, do you think you got lucky this time?” I asked.

“No, son, lucky got me.”

We all laughed. After about two hours of lighthearted, in-room conversation, we noticed him getting tired. Monique and I then left so that he could take a nap.

Soon we were back on I-85, headed southwest, listening to Roxy Music’s *Siren* album. *Were you ever lonely? Mystified and blue? Realizing only – your number’s up. You’re through!*

“Well, Monique, the whole day is open. We’ve got knowhere [sic] with a muted k to go, and all day to get there. Anywhere that you would like to stop on the way back to Charlotte?”

“Let’s check Concord Mills for Liverpool jerseys.”

“Ok, sure, Agent 32. Let’s get our Anfield on.” *He must already have that darn audio recorder on.*



We were soon taking Exit 49 to a very congested mall. Parking was an irksome misadventure. *The most-visited site in North Carolina: a shopping mall. Go figure. Well, I guess we're now adding to the tally.*

We entered the mall and walked the large elongated oval concourse and found one store selling LFC (Liverpool Football Club) gear. The name of the outlet was Flag-something. However, they didn't have our sizes, and the prices were on the steep slope. *I can beat these prices online all day long.*

We then moved along and settled for a pair of cara-fraps (caramel frappuccinos) at the obligatory Starbucks.

"Is this mall always this busy, Agent 33?"

"Oh, it gets even worse in the fall, Agent 32. It's really bad in December in the run-up to Christmas."

"Oh, let's not come then."

"Don't worry; we won't."

We both chuckled and slurped down the gooey dregs of our frozen coffee concoctions. Then we promptly exited the mall.

Once back in the old, gray Kia Rio hatchback, we slowly made our way down to US 29. At the stoplight, Monique looked in awe at the large, long, curved structure (Charlotte Motor Speedway) looming just ahead.

"Is there a race this weekend, Parkaar? [my ailing alias] Are the racecars in there?"

“No, Monique, not this weekend. The next race is in mid-October. Probably no racecars in there now. I think the [zMax] Dragway has something going on next month, though.”

The light turned green and I turned right. About a mile later we could see the Charlotte skyline from a hill near the Mecklenburg-Cabarrus County line.

“Hey, 33, let’s go down to uptown Charlotte!” *Down to up. I like that phrase. That’s a keeper.*

“Ok, sure.”

“Yey! You know, just walking around and hanging out in Romare Bearden Park.” [a popular new park in 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward]

“Sounds good to me. Let’s do it.”

“I love hanging out there, 33. I love the downtown scene.”

“You mean uptown?”

“Oops! You got me there, 33.”

“Just joking, 32. Either is correct. But, you know what: I forgot something.”

“What?”

“A typewriter.” *What in the world? Is he already granulated?*

“A typewriter? Why do we need a typewriter, Agent 33?”

“Because one is not truly hip in the CLT [the 3-letter airport code for Charlotte] until one brings their typewriter to Romare Bearden Park.” *And types collages.*

“Oh, Parkaar, now that would be such a funny pic. Just do it next time when you have your über-hipster sunglasses – the ones with the dangling yellow moustache.” *Hmmm ... Now, where are those shades?*

“Ok, I’ll wait for a nice fall day. Hey, you want to stop at Ross in University Place first? Sometimes they have Premier League T-shirts. I’ve seen United, Arsenal and Chelsea shirts in other Ross stores.”

“Sure, Agent 33! You know that Ross is my favorite store.”

“I do know that, lovely Agent 32.”

We laughed. Monique was excited about another visit to Ross. Unfortunately, we struck out at this store on this particular mission.

We continued going south on North Tryon Street. Once in the uptown area, I found a free parking spot on College Street near 8<sup>th</sup> Street. This free parking zone was once a little-known secret, but now that word had spread about it, vacant spaces could be hard to come by. (And, I guess that typing this info is just going to make it worse.)

“Well, we’re here, 32.”

“How long can we park here, 33? I don’t want our vehicle to get towed again.” *No, not again. Only eight minutes past ten*

*and they had already hooked the old van. Yeah, that would suck a groty [grotesque in California Valley Girl slang] goat egg. Wait, goats don't lay eggs. What was I thinking?*

*"Monique, we're good here until ten o'clock. We'll be back way before then, I'm sure." Must stay cognizant of the time. Can't afford another \$140 towing episode. / Better remind him. I'm sure that he'll forget again.*

*"I certainly hope so. I don't want to take the bus home again." Neither do I.*

We walked up to North Tryon Street on East 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Once we were at the intersection, I looked across the street.

*"Want to have a beer over there, Monique?"*

*"Where, 33?"*

I pointed at the base of the 10-story building. "That place is a micro-brewery, bar and restaurant. They make their own beer. It's pretty good. Devetron (another psecret psociety agent) bartended there."

*"Why, sure!" Monique was eager to try it out.*

We entered the Rock Bottom Restaurant & Brewery. It wasn't very crowded. Just a farrago of tourists, it seemed, but wasn't sure if any were from Fargo. An assortment of baseball and NFL (National Football League) preseason games were on the flat screens, but no one seemed to be watching the gallimaufry. *Gallimaufry, the odd-lot word of the day. Glad I looked that one up earlier. Quite a yawner of a*

*sports-on-TV afternoon. No EPL [English Premier League] matches on now; it's way too late. NFL preseason? Meh. August baseball games could only interest a MLB [Major League Baseball] purist. And, I'm just not one of them.*

I had a dark beer and Monique had a light one. They were pretty good. Thus, we had another round. However, for some strange reason, time hung like a lumpy necklace.

We departed for the park. Once there, we found a bench out of the sun's reach. It was a hot summer day, but in the shade with a breeze, it wasn't too bad; it was endurable. *Where is autumn hiding? The hunt for mid-October.*

Monique was watching people file into BB&T Ball Park, just across Mint Street. "Is there a Knights game tonight, Parkaar?"

"Yeah, it looks like it, Agent 32. Though, I am not sure who they are playing."

Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of someone who looked like Agent 111 approaching. I waited a few more paces to make sure it was really him. It was indeed guitarist-agent 111. He was with his lovely better half.

"Greetings, 111," I said. "What a chance meeting!"

"Hi Larry!" Monique shouted.

"Howdy, 32 and 33. Going to the game?"

"No, we're just hanging out," Monique said.

“Are you guys going?” I asked.

“Yes, we are, but we wanted to check this park out first,” Agent 111 said.

“We love this park, 111,” Agent 32 said. “We come down here every other weekend. Well, maybe every third.”

“Well, let us take your pic and we’ll get going,” Agent 111 said as he quickly prepared to snap a pic of us with his cell phone. (The exact photograph is somewhere on the psecret psociety Facebook page.)

“Ok, shoot us, 111!” Monique shouted.

He did and they quickly began to walk towards the stadium.

“Enjoy the game,” I said as they made their way over to the fountain wall and disappeared behind it.

“Are you ready to leave, Monique?” I asked.

“No, I want to stay longer, Agent 33.”

“Hey, let’s walk up to the grassy area at the corner of Mint and 4<sup>th</sup>, Monique. You can see the game from there, and it’s free.”

“Wow! Then let’s go!”

We found a soft section of turf in the shade that had a view from center field to home plate. We sat down. Others began to do the same thing. *This aint too bad for the price: zilch.*

We had only been sitting for four minutes when a well-dressed, neat, Caucasian gentleman in his late 50s with a stylishly attired, elegant, white lady of the same age accosted us. *They look like a model Myers Park husband and wife. What do they want with us? They sure don't look like the aggressive Charlotte panhandlers that keep approaching us.*

"Here ya go, guys: two tickets to the game," the man said as he held out a pair of tickets that looked legit from three feet away. *Is this some scam? Don't get gullible. / Yey!*

"How much do you want for them?" I asked.

"Nothing. Zero. They're free. We can't use them tonight."

I took the two tickets from his right hand. "Ok, thanks. I really appreciate that. We weren't planning on going to the game, but the evening is open for us. We will use them." *They're probably counterfeit. But, we'll just try them and see if we get in. If not, it will be a good life lesson for Monique / Of course we'll use them. Gosh, he can be so demented sometimes.*

"Have a great time," he said as they began to walk away.

To my subdued amazement, the tickets passed the bar-code scan test. And, just like that, we were in the sold-out, skyline-view, Triple-A stadium.

"Where are our seats, Agent 33?"

I looked at the tickets. "Home Run Club, section 112, row B, seats 7 and 8."

We then followed the signs for Section 112. Once in that area, an usher led us down towards the field. The seats were second row, behind home plate. *Wow!*

A colorfully dressed African American couple in their 50s sat beside us. The lady nudged my arm and said: "There are still good people in this world." The man then added: "Do good and good will find you."

I smiled. "Yeah, you're right." *So, that man on Mint Street has given away at least four tickets. But, what will Agent 111 think if he sees us here? Maybe he'll think that Agents 32 & 33 are a pair of liars! I'll have him read the short story once I type it up.*



### 31. LFC in CLT (August 2014)

Finally. Yes, finally, it was August 2<sup>nd</sup> (2014). It was the Saturday when the legendary EPL (English Premier League) titan Liverpool would be playing in our city (Charlotte), on our field (Bank of America Stadium), or pitch as they say across the pond, against Serie A (the top soccer/football league in Italy) powerhouse AC Milan.

We, Agents 32 (Monique, my wife), 33 (me) and 666 (my provocative soccer-playing son) had got hooked on LFC (Liverpool Football Club) while watching them play on NBCSN on Saturday and Sunday mornings the previous season. Their attacking style and raucous, ultra-passionate Anfield fans had won us over. This would be our EPL team through thick and thin, win or lose.

I had bought tickets for the three of us online several months in advance, as I feared the match might sell out. Once I received the e-mail from the ticketing agency, I printed the attachments (the tickets) and left the sheets of paper in the printer tray, where they proceeded to collect dust. This morning at 9:47 AM I brushed them off and counted to make sure that I had all three of them.

“Well, today is the big day, guys,” I announced to my two sleepyheads.

“Dad, do you think that I don’t know that?!” My son gave me a ‘duh’ facial expression.

“I’m so excited to go in that stadium and see Liverpool play, honey,” my wife then said.

After lunch we donned our Liverpool shirts, gathered our things and loaded the gray Kia. The six-mile drive to our secret free-parking area (eight tenths of a mile southeast of the stadium) went off without a hitch or a post.

We disembarked and walked to Bank of America Plaza for some pre-game refreshments. A parade of people in red were walking south on Tryon Street, chanting their way towards the stadium. They were Liverpool fans.

I had anticipated a lot of noisy LFC supporters, but my wife and son were in total awe with mouths agape. I was a bit surprised, too. The loud, spirited, jubilant procession continued with no end in sight.

“Hon, how long is that line?” my wife asked.

“I think it will be nonstop for the next hour, Agent 32” *Agent 32? He’s already recording.*

“Really?!” my son shouted.

“Yeah, Agent 666. [He demanded this nefarious agent number over my semi-fervent protestations.] Liverpool has a global fanbase. There are people in Charlotte today from all over North America, and probably a sizeable contingent from northwestern England.”

“They are really filing in now, 33.” *Great. My wife has already picked up on my psecret psociety recording mode and is calling me Agent 33. Most excellent.*

“Let’s go now!” my son yelled as he jumped out of his chair. “I want to chant with them. We’re wasting time just sitting here! Let’s not let the LFC parade pass by without us.”

“Ok, ok, ok. Just give us a few seconds.” I was trying to stall my eager-to-go son for a minute.

My wife and I quickly gulped down our soft drinks. Then we got up and walked over to Tryon Street and merged into the Red Sea march.

The first chant we heard was an easy one-worder [*sic*] (the pitch just alternated from high to low). *LIVERPOOL, Liverpool, LIVERPOOL, Liverpool ...*

Next, we heard the one about the famous Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher. It was being sung to The Beatles *Yellow Submarine* melody. *And number one is Carragher, and number 2 is Carragher, and number 3 is Carragher, and number 4 is Carragher. Carragher! We all dream of a team of Carraghers ...*

But then, not surprisingly, the chants started to attack rival Premier League teams. Arsenal got shelled first. *Same old Arsenal, always cheating ...*

Chelsea got an off-color blast next. *F::ck off Chelsea FC, you aint got no history ...*

And, as we turned right onto Stonewall Street to close in on the stadium, looming just ahead, the most vulgar chant commenced. *All Manchester is full of sh:t ...*

“Agent 666, pretend like you didn’t hear that,” I said.

“I heard it, dad!”

Then a burgundy-colored SUV pulled up next to us Reds fans. A black-haired, 30-something, Caucasian lady, sporting an AC Milan topper, gave a thumbs-down. Her scream: “Liverpool sucks!” *Oh, my. This should get interesting.*

Several Liverpool fans immediately ran up to her open window. I feared that something ugly was getting ready to transpire, and began to wonder if this was the start of a fracas that might end up involving CMPD (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department). But, happily, just three seconds later everyone was laughing.

Then, four minutes later, we were getting the metal detector treatment at the stadium’s east gate. Once inside the modern colosseum, my son and wife invariably searched out a souvenir stand. *How much will this cost?*

The first team-apparel booth had a line that was at least a half-hour long. We passed on it. *Jeez. Hope they are all not so crowded.*

The second booth had just two people in line. *This is more like it.*

“Here we go, guys,” I said. “Hardly any line here. Tell me what you like.”

We looked at the items for sale, pinned to the back wall, and noticed that there was no LFC gear.

“There’s no Liverpool stuff here, dad.”

“Oops, wrong line,” I said. “This is an AC Milan booth. That’s why the line is so short.”

We all laughed. Even the African American female counter clerk had a chuckle.

“Uh, let’s try upstairs,” I suggested.

“Ok, 33, lead the way,” my wife said.

We took a pair of the newly installed escalators up to the 500 level (my wife and I on one; my son on the other one, making silly faces at us).

We quickly found a Liverpool FC table with a queue that was only ten deep. My wife got a red LFC cap and my son got a YNWA (You’ll Never Walk Alone) red scarf. I settled for an eight-cubic-inch, translucent box of archetypal Liverpool August weather: cool and damp with gray clouds.

We discovered our seats in section 546 and sat down, watching the stadium incrementally fill. Fans in LFC jerseys took their seats in front of us. Famous Liverpool last names stared back at us. GERRARD | STURRIDGE | SUAREZ | OWEN | RUSH | FOWLER | COUTINHO *Ah, the contemporary LFC Hall of Fame here.*

My wife began to scan the stadium. “Wow, this is a big stadium, Agent 33. How many people can it hold?”

“Around 73,000, I think.”

“Did this game sell out, dad?”

“It came close, son. I think the total attendance will come in around 70,000. [The attendance would later be announced as 69,364.] They promoted it fairly well.”

I studied the jersey colors of the fans. The crowd had to be 80% or more for Liverpool; it was essentially a home game for the mighty Reds. This would be confirmed during the starting lineup announcements, as thunderous applause greeted the team from Merseyside. It was also evident during the singing of Liverpool’s heartfelt anthem: *You’ll Never Walk Alone*.

Once the game started, it didn’t take long for the Reds to score. In the 16<sup>th</sup> minute, Welshman Joe Allen stole the ball and broke into the box. His shot hit the left post and rebounded to Raheem Sterling, who took a shot. AC Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati blocked it, but couldn’t hold it. The soft rebound came back to Allen’s right foot, who didn’t miss this time. One-nil for Liverpool. This would be the halftime score.

In the second half, AC Milan pressed forward and tried to equalize, but left themselves exposed on the back late in the game. In the 89<sup>th</sup> minute, Suso passed to a charging Coutinho on the left flank, who passed it back to him. His sly, low, curling shot made it two-nil, and that’s how it would end.

It was a wonderful, majestic, unforgettable night. The Liverpool team would do a slow victory lap while their song – the Gerry and the Pacemakers version – was replayed over the stadium speakers, a pair of which that were just above

our heads. *Walk on, walk on / With hope in your heart / And you'll never walk alone / You'll never walk alone*

"Thanks, dad. That was freaking awesome!"

"Thanks so much, honey, I mean Agent 33," my wife added.

"You are most welcome, guys. Glad we could do it. I knew that you two would like this."

"When does Liverpool play again in Charlotte, dad?"

"Not sure, Agent 666."

"I hope they come back every summer!" my wife shouted.

"Me, too, Agent 32," I cheerfully said.

"Dad, why are you calling us by our agent numbers? Is this really psecret psociety material? A sporting event?"

"Well, remember how it looked like there would be a violent thunderstorm before we came to the game, son?"

"Yes," my son conjunctively answered.

"Well, by releasing the contents of that box of Anfield atmosphere, I was able to keep those lightning zappers in South Carolina. Notice how the sky stayed overcast with only a few lonely raindrops."

"Dad, you are stretching the truth again."

<snap>

### 32. **The Bulge** (October 2014)

While on a Wednesday-in-mid-October lunchbreak, a from-the-old-daze, yet still quite inventive, 40-something, dark-haired, Caucasian, actor-friend that we code-named Al Niño (Agent A~O) – who now lives the posh life in Manhattan – dropped by my spartan Charlotte office without a whiff of a warning. Though, he did reek of the green leaf.

“Mike, Mike, Mike. Mr. Mike van Tryke. [my art name] Old, and getting older by the hour, ancient Agent 33 [my psecret psociety number]. And, what nefariousness would you be up to now, improbable scenester?” [sic] *Improbable scenester?*

“Oh, boy. And, oh the joy! Well, look who is here. If it isn’t the amazing one himself. It’s great to see you, Al. It has been a wily while.” *A wily while? He’s still as cooked as ever.*

“It certainly has. It sore-really has, my friend. You still look like ... well ... you. And not a day over 75.” [real age at the time: 50] *Once a joker ...*

“You’re still quite a funny guy, Al. You shouldn’t have given up on that comedy angle.”

“I have a cute, acute angle of attack now, my friend.” *Prepare for PUNishment. [sic]*

“Piling on the punnage [sic] already?”

“Ah, you caught it, 33.”

“Why, of course I caught it. I always have my flutterfly [sic] net open for way astrays.” *What the hell did Tryke just say?*



“Way astrays ... straying wayward, by chance?”

“Sure, why not, Al?”

“Ah-hem. Hey, why don’t you ever make good on your autumnal threats to visit me, Michael?” *Oh, no, not the ‘Michael’ bit. He knows that I hate being called that.*

“Ebola, man. I’m not getting on a plane until it settles down.”

“You’ve been freaked-out by the mass media, mate. The threat is way overblown for people in the US.”

“Maybe so, Al. Maybe slow.”

“See, this is why I don’t watch American news anymore. It’s all shock and sensationalism for ratings.” *Here comes his anti-American-media tirade again.*

“Yeah, yeah, yeah; whatever, Al. I’ve heard that rant before. Please spare me the harangue.”

Al then looked at the back of my computer monitor. He raised his eyebrows and gave a snarky smirk. “So, what do you have up on your screen today, 33? Some kinky Asian porn?” (It was just a diagram of a streetcar track alignment; you can see it by clicking [here](#).)

> [return mark] Thanks for coming back. Your tea was getting cold.

“Yeah, right. Fock [*sic*] you, Al.”

We both chuckled and nearly got engulfed in an unbridled guffaw as he walked around my desk, stopping behind my creaking swivel chair to see what was on my computer screen (which was the image that you just viewed, minus the black arrow and the text *The Bulge*).

Al then cleared his throat. "Is that the light rail extension that I keep hearing about? Making the single line longer and straighter?" He chortled.

"No, no, no. Wrong again, amazer. It's actually the middle section of the streetcar route, the new Gold Line."

"I don't know, Michael; I'm not finding this image to be very arousing. Maybe I'm missing something. What's the attraction? Are you on pills? Got any extras? Sniffing rubber cement again? Ok, where did you hide it? Is it in this drawer? Why is this locked?" *What the hell is he on? Gosh, he's all hyped-up today.*

"Alright, alright, alright. Please stop. If you can be still and quiet for 100 seconds, I'll explain."

"For a whole 1.67 minutes, Michael?" *Just lovely. He's already stuck on the 'Michael' bit.*

"Good math, Al."

"As you were saying, 33 ..."

"Ok, just don't interrupt me. This is slightly complicated. Just slightly. Can you just hear me out without interjecting nonsense and ransacking my office?"

“Ok, I promise to keep my tongue tied in a wet slipknot and my limbs in invisible shackles.”

“Excellent. Let’s hop on subject and stay aboard. Here we go.”

“My ears are wide open, Michael.” *Oh, jeez.*

“Well, as I think I’ve told you in the not-too-distant past, I ride my bike to work, weather permitting.”

Al just nodded and rubbed his black beard stubble with his right hand. I noticed a silver ring on his middle finger. *Did he secretly get married?*

I continued. “Well, this morning while riding my bike over the freight train tracks that cross Central Avenue next to the Thirsty Beaver Saloon, I wondered how they would run the streetcar tracks in this area. I knew that CSX would never allow an at-grade crossing, as it would be way too dangerous and probably a logistical nightmare, and most likely not even allowed by the overseeing governmental agencies.”

Al gave me an affirming tilt of his noggin, which seemed to say, ‘ok, I follow you; now, please continue.’

“So, if an at-grade, street-level crossing is out of the question, how will they do it? Will they tunnel under the freight line? No way; it’s too expensive and it would flood. Will they build a bridge, or a pair of bridges, over the freight line? That seems awfully expensive, too. Well, needless-to-say, streetcar track-alignment curiosity got the better portion

of my mind. As soon as my lunchbreak arrived, I was going to research this. Well, lo, hi and behold, I found an official streetcar alignment map on the CATS website. Now, take a closer look at the map, Al.”

He scrunched closer. His mug was now hovering just above my right shoulder. I could smell herb (marijuana) on his breath. *He probably got baked on the ride over here. I won't bring it up. Well, maybe later.*

“Al, notice how the green line bulges up to the Hawthorne at Barnhardt station? Uh, you can speak now. Your mute button is now off.”

“Why, thank you, Michael.” *Just effing [sic] great. His annoying 'Michael' routine hasn't yet ended.*

“Only my mom calls me that, Al. And, it's usually when it's not good. Can we go back to Mike or Agent 33?” *I wonder if Trykle [sic] is recording me. I bet the sneaky bastard is. / I wonder how many of my short stories he's read.*

“I must tell you, Michael. That's the longest I've ever held my breath.” *No letup. He's flying high on more than just a bowl of Arcata [California] weed.*

“You do look bluer than normal, Al. Completely hypoxic, I'd say – and did. Maybe I should call for a paramedic.”

He snapped out of his 'Michael' nonsense for just a moment. “Ok, I see the green bulge, 33. I hope you have more than that chub for Agent 32 [Monique, my wife] tonight.”

“Very funny. Very focking [sic] funny. You never stop, do you, AI? Never miss a chance to lob in a zinger.”

“Hey, you usually start it.” *Do I? Don’t think so.*

“Ok, let’s get back on topic.”

“Absolutely. We must keep pumping topic, Michael.”  
*Pumping topic?*

“Well, amazing one, what do you think the solution is to this crossing-railroad-tracks dilemma?”

“The bulge, right?”

“Well, yes, but what does the bulge do, AI?”

“The bulge seeks a bulgette.” AI chuckled.

“Sheez, I’m glad that I’m recording this conversation.” *Oh, yes, I knew it.*

“Oh, are you really, 33?”

“Affirmative. We safety guys don’t trust unrecorded verbal statements. People have a way of conveniently forgetting what they’ve said when in the hot seat.” *What hot seat? What in the world is he talking about?*

“Well, please do some redacting before typing this convo [sic] up, Mister Agent 33.” *Mister Agent?*

“Yeah, sure. Now, back to the question. Notice the green line crossing the faint brown line?”

“Yes, Michael.” *Oh, jeez.*

“Remember Hawthorne Lane in this area?”

“Yes, that old bridge – it’s a railroad overpass.”

“Right! Which means that the at-grade streetcar line can safely ...?”

“... go under the freight train overpass?” *Well, he’s not completely stoned out of his gourd after all.*

“You got it, Al! You must have smoked your Smart Weedies [sic] this morning. I’d stay with that brand.”

“It’s par for the curse, [sic] brother.” *Yep, he’s read some of my short stories. I wonder where. Which website?*

“The proposed streetcar route then curves into the end of Clement Avenue, which then loops back to Central Avenue. An ingenious solution, don’t ya think, Al?”

“I do, Michael. I think a lot, even more than most women.”

“Now, there’s a keeper, amazing one.” *Must include that line in the write-up.*

“So, you buying dinner later, Michael?” *What the fock! [sic] Mr. Moneybags wants me to buy him dinner?! / That should get Trykle’s goat. Let’s see how he reacts.*

“Yeah, right, Al. Get the hell out of here.”



Click [here](#) to return to story.

### 33. **One October Day** (October 2014)

One windswept October day in 2014 found me at the corner of Elizabeth Avenue and North Kings Drive, the corner where the old Central High Building (of Central Piedmont Community College, which was once Charlotte College and Garinger High School) rests atop Little Sugar Creek in an often flooded depression in near-uptown Charlotte (just outside the inner loop). *I wonder if anything valuable is down in that creek tunnel at this very moment. Maybe some hidden gold? Why would anyone hide anything valuable down there? Why do I think such nonsense?*

I was waiting to cross Kings, while watching the cars and trucks zoom by on I-277, which was about a football field or so in front of me. *Liverpool played in this city a little over two months ago. I think they looked better back then. They had better win the next three games. Chelsea is running away with it. [Chelsea would win the 2014-15 English Premier League season going away.] Still can't believe Gerrard slipped. The football/soccer gods must despise LFC [Liverpool Football Club] now. Some cruel payback for the glory years in the '70s and '80s.*

I turned my gaze back to the pedestrian signal that still had a red hand up. I waited, though no traffic was coming, as I didn't want to set a bad example for the students nearby. *Ah, just wait it out. No rush.*

I glanced over at the streetcar rail construction across the street. Most of the trackway had been poured and the rails inset; that segment was almost done. *Looks like the project*



*is back on schedule now. Can't believe that the contractor set the tracks down at the wrong gauge. Maybe the foreman was from Russia. [Russian rail gauge is 5'-0", not the standard gauge of 4'-8.5" that is used throughout America.] One costly screw-up. I bet he got fired.*

Then suddenly, a middle-age, white guy with semi-long blonde-to-gray hair was next to me. *Where did he come from?*

"Hey man, which way to the South Boulevard?" he asked. *'The' South Boulevard? He's from out of town.*

I noticed his untied, tan, oil-stained, ran-through-the-last-mill hiking boots. "On foot?" I asked to prequalify my answer.

"Hey now, does it look like I have a car?" *I wonder if this guy has been drinking all night.*

A Google Maps image of central Charlotte appeared on my mind's front screen, flickering at first before gaining a clean horizontal hold.

"Ok, listen, just cross this street and go about four or five blocks to Caldwell, and turn left. Caldwell will become South Boulevard after four blocks as you go over I-277. That's the shortest route."

"No, I don't want the 277. I'm going to the 77." *What is it with his exaggerated use of 'the' definite article?*

The Elizabeth Avenue pedestrian signal was now in red-numeral countdown mode: 9 – 8 – 7 – 6 ...

“So, let me get this straight ... you want to walk down South Boulevard to get to I-77. I’m sorry, but South Boulevard doesn’t cross or connect with I-77.”

“I know. I know that, man. I just need to take the South Boulevard to the Tyvola to the 77.” *The, the, the ... it sounds so insane.*

“So, cutting across on Tyvola. Ok.”

“I mapped it out before I left. It’s only 4.5 miles. I can walk ten miles. This is nothing. I walk everywhere. I’m a bigtime walker, man.”

“I hear ya. I’m a walker, too. Actually, more of a bicycler.”

“Dude, I walked a marathon route one day. Twenty-six point two freaking miles!”

The Kings Drive pedestrian signal cycled again. I was now staring at a white walk sign.

“Ok, I hear ya. Just follow me.”

“Ab-sooooo-lutely.” *He’s polluted drunk, or inebriated on something. Pills?*

We walked across Kings Drive and stopped on the northwest corner.

“Ok, which way on the 77?” I asked. *Wow, I’m now overusing the definite article, too. His the-the madness is infecting my mind.*

“South, man, south. When I get to the shoulder of the 77, this right thumb is going out and I’ll be off to the Columbia, South Carolina – my next stop.”

“Ok, so you’ll be hitchhiking?”

“Yes-sir-ree. All the way to the Florida. Eventually.”

“Getting out of Charlotte before it gets cold?”

“Uh, yeah; that, too, I guess.”

“I’ve been to Florida twice. Tampa Bay area. Clearwater and Bradenton. That’s about it.”

“I’ve never been to the Florida, man! Can you believe that? Man, I’ve never ever been to the Florida! I’m like 48 freaking years old and I’ve never been to the F-L-A! Is that crazy?!”

“I don’t know about that. There are plenty of states that I haven’t been to.”

“But, you’ve been to the Florida, man!”

“Yeah, like I just said: I’ve been to the Florida.” *‘The’ Florida. Gosh, it sounds so whacked.*

The soon-to-be-hitchhiker then noticed the Little Sugar Creek Greenway on the other side of Elizabeth Avenue. *I hope that he doesn’t decide to walk it. He’s too amusing to be arrested by the police.*

“Hey, I saw this greenway on the MapQuest. Can’t I just follow this greenway trail to the 77?”

“No, I wouldn’t advise that. This greenway just goes farther and farther away from southbound I-77.”

“But, it goes south, right?”

“Well, yeah, it does. But, I-77 South goes more southwest than south as it leaves this city. You really should continue walking up Elizabeth Avenue, which will become Trade Street without a clue.” *Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.*

“Without a clue? What is this, the puzzle town?” *Yep, I shouldn’t have tacked on that ‘without a clue’ prepositional phrase. He’s confused enough as it is. No need to pile on.*

I looked at him with a straight face. “I mean that the street name will change for no apparent reason. It’s very typical for this burg.” *Should I have just said city?*

“Yeah, I’ve already noticed that since I’ve been here.” *He’s more observant than I suspected.*

“When did you get here?” I asked out of a quickly expanding curiosity.

“Five freaking days ago.”

“Where are you from, if I may ask?” *His accent sure is hard to place.*

“Everywhere but the Florida.” He started to guffaw.

“Hey, that’s a good one. Very funny.” I chuckled for a few seconds with him. *He seems to be very inebriated on something. No alcohol odor. Probably pills. But, what pills is*

*he on? A mix? Hydro and Xanax? Oxy and Adderall? Does he have any extras? What the hell am I thinking?*

“Dude, I came in from Richmond – Richmond, Virginia. I had been staying with some old friends. One dude’s father dropped in on our conversation last night about old times and said that he went to high school down here in the 1950s. Central High, I think he said.”

“Wow, that’s the building across the street. The community college acquired it over a half-century ago. It was built in the 1920s, and the basement proves it.” *I wonder if there is water in it right now. Probably so. [There was an average of 2.54” inches of water on the old slab floor.] Glad they filled in that creepy void with concrete. / I wonder what is in the basement of that building. Why would he say ‘the basement proves it’? Is Jimmy Hoffa buried in there?*

“You learn something old every new day.” *He’s still quite clever in spots, despite his woozy stupor.*

“Nice turn of a phrase. You should write that one down. Maybe use it in some writing someday.”

“That’s a grand idea, man. You got a piece of paper and a pen?”

“Sure. One sec.”

I extracted an old psecret psociety card from my left front shirt pocket. I then handed the card and blue ball-point pen to him.

He accepted the two items. Then he read the front of the card. "Huh? A psecret psociety? What in the heck is that?"

"Nothing to get too concerned about. Just a frivolous Facebook group."

"All of Facebook is frivolous!" he yelled.

"Yeah, you might be right. But, I can't knock it completely."

"Why not? It's just a colossal time-waster that removes you from your immediate environment." *And, that's probably why it's so popular.*

"Well, I met my wife on it. But, as to your point about it wasting time and removing a person's mind from their here and now, well, I agree. I think that's why so many people are on it. It's a bit of an electronic-escape drug. And, it's free."

"My escape is the open road. Always has been."

"I hear ya, man."

"Well, it's been nice chatting with you, kind sir, but I must be on my way as the song goes."

"Likewise. Stay safe. Bon voyage!"

"How about Von Boyage? Can that be my alias in the psecret psociety?"

"Sure. Why not? Run with it. Join and stay in touch."

“Will do when/if I get in front of a computer again. But, don’t hold your breath, man. It may be a while. Quite a while.”

“Well, excellent. No rush. There’s no shot clock running.”  
*Shot clock?*

He then began to walk up Elizabeth Avenue, heading towards the sky-reflecting glass towers. *A definite article, he sureth [sic] be.*

His 5’-10” frame soon disappeared as I crossed Elizabeth Avenue and began walking down the greenway en route to Target – my usual weekday lunch stop.

As I looked at the southward-flowing, greenish gray creek, my mind began to meander, ending up in a knot in the 1.15 MPH current. *I wonder if he makes it to Florida. Heck, will he even make it to Columbia? Ah, sure he will. He seems like an old pro at this. I wonder what his story is. When did he start wandering? Did he lose it all in Virginia? Will he join ‘the’ psecret psociety? Will he return to Charlotte next fall? Will he find what he is looking for? Will he ever read this short story online somewhere? Or, in print? Will he relay this tale ... one October day?*

#### 34. **Fall of the Yellow Jackets** (October 2014)

Agent 32, aka Monique (the Asian Zing), and I, Parkaar, nebulous Agent 33, found ourselves on the back patio on a splendid late October afternoon in east Charlotte, feeling as if we were inside one of those plastic-wrapped, pricy, gift-shop postcards.

What follows is the largely unedited audio track set to typographic characters, as it's so hard to read sounds on a blank white screen. Though, I've tried on many an occasion.

Agent 32: "It sure is a nice day, hon. It's not too hot and not so cold yet."

Agent 33: "It really is, mahal. [love in Tagalog] It's simply sublime today."

32: "Autumn splendor in America, Parkaar."

33: "No doubt, Monique. And, the summer mosquitoes seem to be gone now. We can finally enjoy this patio without being gooped in a pint of bug spray."

32: "Yeah, that stuff is gross. And, you know how I hate mosquitoes. In the Philippines, we see them as dangerous disease carriers. They are no-good airborne transporters of dengue, yellow fever, and the dreaded malaria."

33: "Well, our American mosquitoes don't carry those unpleasantries, at least not at last check. However, some do transmit the West Nile Virus, which can be deadly."



From out of who knows where, a yellow jacket began to check out Monique's plastic cup on the frosted glass table. It crawled around on the rim with its antennae twitching all about.

32: "Woah! What kind of bee is that, bana?" [husband in Cebuano]

33: "Oh, it's just a yellow jacket, dear. They get very active this time of year."

32: "Can it sting me?"

33: "Only if it is a female."

32: "Do female yellow jackets only sting female humans?" She then laughed for a few seconds.

33: "The males don't have stingers."

32: "So, you're safe? Lucky you!" Monique laughed again.

33: "And, no, I could just as likely be stung, mahal."

32: "Have you ever been stung by a yellow jacket, Parkaar?"

33: "Yes, many times. Way too many to count. Most of the stings occurred when I was mowing the lawn or out hiking in the mountains." *Who was he hiking with?*

32: "Oh."

33: "They like to make their nests in the ground. Once you step on one, the aerial cavalry is dispatched."

32: "Really?"

33: "Yep. It's then full assault."

32: "Well then, can you tell if this one is a female?"

33: "Not from here, Agent 32. I'd have to examine that little wasp in my office."

32: "That's so funny." Monique giggles for a couple of seconds. "Like the yellow jacket is your patient." She laughs some more.

33: "Bee still under the microscope. Get it? Bee spelled with two e's." *He's obviously recording our conversation.*

32: "Of and on course, Parkaar. These yellow jackets sure seem to be buzzing around today."

33: "They do get very ornery this time of year, Monique."

32: "Why is that, 33?"

33: "I think that they know that their time is about up. Maybe they think: Might as well annoy some humans before we become crunchy corpses."

32: "That's crazy, bana! Look, there's one by your left shoe. Stomp it! C'mon, get it, Parkaar!"

33: "No, I'll let it go. If I squish one, a call-to-arms chemical will be released, and then we'll be battling 50 of them, 32."

32: "Are you sure about that, 33?"

33: "Well, maybe just a squadron of 49 in a 7 x 7 formation."  
*What in the world?*

32: "You are so silly, my dearest kano." [Filipino slang for American]

Now a pair of yellow jackets circle Monique's cup of hard cider. She swats at them with her small, bronze-colored, cupped hands. She then pulls her legs up on the chair and starts wailing away, only to fan the air.

33: "No, don't swat at them, hon. They are spoiling for a fight. They are perfectly willing to trade a stinger in your finger for their own death. Just ignore them. Cover your cup with the coaster. It's the sugar in your drink that is attracting them. And, wipe your lips."

32: "Really?"

33: "Yes. Also, keep your pants leg openings closed."

32: "What?!"

33: "I remember this one guy who was hiking with us at Crowders Mountain on an October day – just like this one – and had a yellow jacket fly up his jeans to the back of his knee."

32: "Oh, dear ... what happened then?"

33: "The yellow jacket freaked out when it couldn't get back out of his pants leg, and promptly stung him."

32: "What a drag! That must have sucked!"

33: "And, he was not in the best state of mind to deal with it, either."

32: "What do you mean, 33?"

33: "He was flying high on magic mushrooms at the time. Psilocybe cubensis. Saint of the fields."

32: "Oh, my God! When was this, hon?"

33: "Back in 1988. Millions of yellow jackets ago." I chuckled.

32: "Gosh, did he need medical attention?"

33: "No, he was ok. Amazingly, he didn't freak out; he stayed pretty calm. After fifteen minutes of an ice compress, he was hiking again. But, as for his hiking pal, well, that was another story entirely."

32: "Huh?"

33: "Even though his buddy never got stung, the guy started to hyper-hallucinate: He saw yellow jackets everywhere. This dude then took his flannel shirt off, wound it up, and started whipping it about everywhere, thinking he was swatting yellow jackets. Stop me, if you've heard this story before, Agent 32."

32: "No, honey; I've never heard this one. Please continue, Mr. Agent 33." *Mister? At least she doesn't call me 'Michael'.*

33: "Well, from what he told me, it was quite a scene on the trail. He was a whirling, whipping dervish. Other passing hikers had shocked looks on their faces."

32: "Wow!"

33: "Luckily, the park ranger didn't see him."

32: "Yeah, I guess so. Darn, these yellow jackets will be back again next spring."

33: "But, the yellow jackets are not like this in the spring and summer, mahal. They don't display such bad behavior."

32: "I know, Parkaar."

33: "They are feisty now because many of the insects they feast upon are already dead. They are desperate to find food, especially sugars."

32: "I see. If summer's most annoying insects are mosquitoes, then autumn's have got to be these darn yellow jackets."

33: "Yeah, but I can deal with the yellow jackets, asawa. If you ignore mosquitoes, you still get bit and bit and bit. If you just ignore yellow jackets, you're usually ok ... unless you sit on one."

32: "Yikes! Is there one on my chair?!" Monique then twists her head and body around.

33: "No, you're fine, honey. Relax. Just let them have their final buzzathon." [*sic*]

32: "I don't trust these flying kano stinger-bugs."

We then began to hear a song from inside the house. It was *Waves* by Mr. Probz. *Kirk [Agent 666] must have turned on the radio.*

33: "Do you hear that song, Monique?"

32: "I do, mahal; I surely do. Nice melody, but the story behind the lines is so sad."

33: "Wave after wave. I'm slowly drifting. Drifting right out of Maria Bay." [on the east side of Siquijor] I guffawed at my little twist of the lyrics.

32: "I really miss my island, [Siquijor] hon, especially Lazi."

33: "I know you do, mahal. So lovely in Lazi. You'll be back there soon."

32: It's ok; I'm not homesick. I've adjusted to life in America."

33: "I'm very happy to hear that, Monique. I know that it has been a big change."

32: "Change is part of life. I accept it. Always another wave of change coming."

33: "Speaking of waves, have you seen the video for that song *Waves*, mahal?"

32: "Yeah, I did. Kirk showed me. It's kind of dark, hon, even tragic. The couple is not getting along at all. They are always arguing. I think that the man commits suicide by drowning himself in the hot tub at the end of the song."

33: "Yeah, it does look like he gets drunk and goes under for good. And, of course, it made me think of Frank von Peck."  
[the late, great Agent 107]

32: "I know. I miss him, too."

33: "What I like about the video is the cinematic feel; it's like we're seeing truncated scenes from a movie – an interesting movie – not just silly, random, meaningless images blasted at a rate of 400 per second."

32: "Four hundred images per second? You are exaggerating a bit, aren't you, 33?"

33: "Ok, maybe slightly, 32." For some strange reason, I then wondered if there were any yellow jackets in the music video. "I think the video is free of yellow jackets, Monique."

32: "Are you certain, Parkaarazzi?" [sic] *What did she just say? She's feeling that Strongbow.*

33: "Parkaarazzi? You sure come up with some clever coinages, Agent 32. That's psecret psociety grade all the way to a nether whey." *More nonsense for the recorder.*

32: "Maybe if we analyzed every single frame and zoomed way in ..."

33: "That sounds like a very time-consuming assignment, lovely Agent 32."

32: "Well, we've got the time, this time." *Huh?*

33: “Maybe some other time, sweetie. Say, do you notice any yellow jackets now, mahal?”

Monique checks around her cup, hands, arms, torso and feet, and sees none. Then she looks at my cup.

32: “Yikes! There’s a yellow jacket floating in your cup, Parkaar! Yuck!”

I picked up my cup and gently jostled it. The dying, slowly sinking, ventral-side-up yellow jacket bobbed up and down with the ripples. *Waves. Wave after wave. Heading for the grave.*

33: “And it seems like, yeah, it seems like, its final fall day is fading, fading away.”

32: “Cut it out, Parkaar. You’re no singer.” *That’s the truth.*

We both had a hearty laugh as the digital audio recorder chirped and cut off.



### 35. **One Day in November** (November 2014)

One day in November of 2014 found me at a window seat in the Starbucks inside the Metropolitan Target in midtown Charlotte. It was about noon, I guess. I was on my lunch break.

The weather was sunny yet windy: a refreshing autumn day. I was consuming a cheap lunch of miscellaneous grocery items that I had just purchased, as I watched the construction of another mid-rise apartment building inside the I-277 bend at Stonewall Street. *Well, the cranes are certainly going again in this burg. I wonder how much those units will rent for. Over \$1000 a month for just a studio, I'm sure. A two-bedroom unit would be out of the question. Ah, just stay focused on the complex at 3<sup>rd</sup> and Kings. Easy walk to work from there. Would be perfect. Monique [Agent 32] would certainly like it. But, with my credit score ... maybe, no way. Enough fantasy.*

I then began to overhear a conversation behind me, about twelve feet away, at a table next to the wall. Two middle-age white guys in gray blazers were talking very excitedly. I quickly activated my DAR (Digital Audio Recorder).

One guy seemed to be an author and the other guy ... well, I couldn't quite figure out if he was a prospective literary agent or client of some sort or a potential customer. Without further ado, here's a veritable transcription of their conversation with the apparent author, Dave, leading off.

"And that's what I've been doing."

“No, wait, tell me that again, Dave.”

“Damn it, George! You are much more focused on that frilly coffee than what I’m saying.”

“Ok, Dave, this time you will have my complete attention. I promise.”

“Listen, I’m only going to repeat this one more time, and that’s it.”

“Ok, ok. Go. I’m all ears.”

“You do have some big, hairy-ass ears, George.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. And fock [*sic*] you, too, Dave.”

They both had a hearty chuckle. Then the George guy continued the conversation.

“Now, what did you say that you were doing with the chapters of your new book?”

“I’m doing what I did to get the last book moving along. I’m posting whole chapters on different sites, on different platforms, in different media.”

“What the hell do you mean, Dave?”

“I mean, for instance, with my last book, I put all of chapter one on my personal blogsite.”

“Ok, did you charge a subscription fee to read it?”

“No, it was – and still is – up for anyone to read.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No, I’m not. It’s still there.”

“And, I think I remember you saying that chapter two is online somewhere, too. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s correct, George. Chapter two of my last book is still on my Facebook page.”

“The whole chapter? Can you really post something that long on Facebook?”

“Well, it’s broken up into sections, but it’s all there, and it’s set to public viewing, so even non-friends can read it.”

“Amazing. And, you said that chapter three is on twitter. Am I right?”

“Your memory isn’t so bad, George.”

“So, chapter three is only 140 characters?” George asks and quickly guffaws.

“No. It’s a short chapter alright, but it’s not nearly that short. I mean, c’mon, George, a six-sentence chapter? Really?”

“Hey, I never know what you’re capable of, Dave.”

“I broke it up into about 400 tweets.”

“Broken up into about 400 tweets? Unbelievable, Dave.”

“I try to be, George.”

“Ok, where is chapter four?”

“Excerpts from chapter four were posted in the comments section after various news stories on the internet.”

“You posted them on news websites?”

“Yep. Just a few paragraphs here and there. Always managed to cryptically get the amazon link in.”

“So, you spammed your way to literary glory, Dave.”

“It’s not spam, George; it’s obliquely related to the particular news article.”

“Obliquely? You’re too much, Dave. I’m sure you got torched with hate mail along the way.”

“Yes, sometimes. And when it occurred, I just replied with chapter five.” Dave grinned while adjusting his glasses.

George looked completely stunned. “You are absolutely mad, Dave. Truly mad.”

“George, you have to do out-of-the-box things to get anywhere if you’re an unknown and unconnected author.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying. Ok, what are we up to? Chapter six?”

“Yes, chapter six.”

“Ok, let me guess, you handwrote it on rolls of toilet paper in select hotels in New York City.”

“No, in London.”

They started laughing hysterically. Their untethered laughter continued for about ten seconds.

“Actually, George, chapter six was printed on large, 11-by-17-inch, yellow sheets of paper, which were then folded into airplanes and launched off random building terraces all over the US.”

“You’re surely kidding me this time, Dave.”

“No, I’m not, George. I saw people below on many occasions taking pictures of the paper planes. And, get this – this still gives me goose bumps - I later saw the unfolded planes on the internet. Ingenious publicity, huh, George?”

“I’m really surprised that you haven’t been arrested yet.”

“Me, too. But, I never launched more than three paper airplanes from any one building. Wouldn’t want to be known as a litterbug.”

“Whew! Too much, Dave.”

“Just doing what I feel like I need to do.”

“Ok, and where can one find chapter seven of your last book for free, Dave?”

“Chapter seven of *Eight Minutes Below Dawn*, which, by the way, is the final chapter, is only available at my seminars. I project the text on the walls. It’s also where I distribute the paperbacks.”

“Paperbacks? So, you have actually been physically published.”

“You thought I was just shopping a digital file?”

“I never know what you are pushing, Dave.”

“I’m getting the paperbacks printed for about three bucks each. I charge \$19.95 a head for the seminar. I just give the books away as door prizes.”

“Door prizes? Seminars? Who would pay money to come to your seminar, Dave?”

“You would be very surprised. Quite an assortment of people from all phases of the spectra. Once you advertise that you get a book, a lottery ticket, coffee and finger food, you’d be amazed at how many attend.”

“Well, what do you bill the seminar as? What’s the moniker? What’s the hook line, Dave?”

“The hook line? Learn how to fold the longest-flying paper airplane and win big money.”

George started laughing. “That’s hysterical! I should be recording this conversation, Dave.”

“I’m sure that someone around here is recording us.”

That’s when my DAR died. I got up to leave. Dave and George stopped talking as I made my exit.

Walking back to the office, I pondered what I had just heard. *Should I employ some of these methods? Paper airplanes with a chapter from 'Gold, a summer story' [my e-novel] printed on them in a tiny font size. Why, that's crazy! But, maybe crazy enough to get noticed. Maybe just one airplane per city or town. I don't know, I'd probably get charged with littering. And, since it's an adult novel, I wouldn't want it to land in a kid's hands. Yeah, nix that idea. Probably better to just stick with internet tactics. No physical issues with online methods. Maybe use hyperlinks galore.*

<honk> Two passing cars on East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street almost make contact. One driver was texting and started to lane drift. *Everyone is glued to their cell phones now. Maybe do some advertising targeting mobile phones. Maybe just keep writing and posting short stories. Maybe just <beep> watch out for non-stopping right turns.*

"Hey, watch it!"

### 36. **Rooftop Horror** (December 2014)

The strangely tragic death of Chinese Canadian Elisa Lam made its way into our chattering office circles this past week. In case you forgot, or never heard, Lam was the 21-year-old female from a Vancouver suburb who ended up dead inside a water tank atop the Cecil Hotel in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles in February of 2013.

This particular hotel is notorious for infamous guests, such as serial killers, [names redacted; we are not in the business of making murders (any more) famous] and for strange events, like a wife's act of defenestration in 1962 that killed a 65-year-old man on the sidewalk below. Talk about a bad day to go for a stroll down Main Street.

Perhaps you remember seeing the über-creepy elevator video (if not, it is still on Youtube as of this write-up). However, Monique (the customary alias for Agent 32) had not heard about this bizarre case until yours truly (Agent 33) informed her. She was very curious to know more, as she's a bigtime *Forensic Files* fanatic. She began reading up on the story on her pink tablet computer.

"The hotel guests reported odd-tasting drinking water with some even describing it as somewhat sweet," Monique recited from a news article. "That's totally effing [*sic*] gross! Major yuck!"

"I know. What a crazy postmortem situation that was."  
*Sickening. / So sad.*



Monique then switched from her tablet computer to our laptop. She prefers it for analyzing videos. She watched the elevator video three times in focused silence. Then she spoke. "So, no other person was seen with her at that hotel?"

"No, no one," I answered as I looked around for the crunch bowl.

"And, she was travelling alone?" *I would never travel to downtown L.A. alone. Never. What was this girl thinking? / She must have been a free spirit.*

"Yep, solo, according to all accounts that I've read. She had a history of travelling alone and using public transportation. She had gone to Toronto alone." *Gosh, she was crazy to do that. No way would I do that.*

"Was she visiting anyone in L.A.?" Monique then asked.

"No, not that anyone is aware of. She checked in with her mom daily by phone. That is, up until January 31<sup>st</sup>, when she disappeared, only to be found on February 19<sup>th</sup> in one of the hotel's four rooftop water tanks by a maintenance worker."

"That's crazy! I can tell from this video that she is buang." [Cebuano for insane]

"Well, apparently she did suffer from bouts of depression and had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder," I said as I swatted at a tiny fruit-decomposition gnat.

"But, being bipolar or depressed wouldn't explain her bizarre behavior in that elevator. Is that hotel haunted?"

“I don’t know about that, 32. Isn’t that kind of stuff in an individual’s head?” *I wonder what’s in his head.*

“I don’t know, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] To me it looks like she saw a mumo.” [Cebuano for ghost or phantom]

“Maybe so. And as you were saying, being bipolar is quite different from being or acting schizophrenic. In that elevator video she appears to be hallucinating – severely hallucinating.”

“Yeah, it does appear that she is interacting with things, persons, or who knows what that aren’t really there.”

“It sure does, 32. In fact, it almost looks like she’s on acid.”

Monique looked puzzled. “On acid? What kind of acid?”

“LSD, that strong psychoactive drug,” I replied.

“Oh, right. But, I just wonder how she got up on the roof. Didn’t you tell me that the door to the roof was locked and alarmed?”

“Yes, I did, and it was. But there are three fire escapes that lead to the roof from the ends of the corridors. In her frightened psychotic state of mind, she could have taken one up to the roof without being detected. There wasn’t a roof-cam [*sic*] up there. At least, not at that time.”

“Are you sure that a hotel employee wasn’t involved? A lot of people on the internet seem to think so, 33.” *Always a possibility.*

“Well, Monique, I did, too ... for a while. And, well, I guess that it can’t be totally ruled out. But, the autopsy report said that there were no signs of foul play. LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] considers the case closed. There were no injuries to her body. No signs of rape or a struggle. And, no drugs were found in her system. Well, at least no nineteen-days-after-being-in-a-water-tank traceable drugs, that is.” *What is he getting at?*

“What do you mean, Parkaarazzi?” *Parkaarazzi?*

“I just can’t rule out LSD or some similar psychedelic drug. I don’t believe they are detectable after three or four days.”

“Ok, then, 33. So, what was the official cause of death in your book, my psuper psleuth [*sic*]?”

“Did you remember the psilent [*sic*] p’s?”

“I did. Did you?”

“Psertainly pso!” [*sic*] *Psilly kano. [sic]*

“Ok, continue, Pumperazzi.” *Pumperazzi? What’s the next inflection?*

“The L.A. coroner’s official cause of death: accidental drowning.”

“What?! Accidental drowning? Do you really think that she wanted to swim in cold water inside a dark tank?” *Something is not right here.*

“I don’t think that she entered that tank to go for a swim.”

“Suicide?” *She read my mind.*

“Yeah, very sadly, I think so, Monique. If I had to bet the farm on a cause, well, that would probably be it.”

“Bet the farm?” Monique gave me an inquisitive gaze.

“Oh, it’s just an old American expression. A figure of speech.” *That figures.*

“Ok, so you vote for suicide as the cause of death, 33?”

“Yeah. While maybe not premeditated, probably something she arrived at.” *Arrived at? He’s so odd with his phrasings since he got that darn voice recorder. I’m sure that he has it on now.*

“I wonder what was going through her mind. She must have been in pure agony.”

“I agree, 32. I think that she became immersed in a horror movie that she couldn’t get out of. I really think that after she left the elevator for the last time, she wandered down the hallway in a completely freaked-out state of mind, thinking that someone or some *thing* was chasing her. She then saw a fire escape and made her way out onto it without being detected by hotel staff. She was able to quietly scurry up the metal steps to the roof. Once on the roof, she realized that she was still not safe from the *mumo*; it was still chasing her and getting closer. She realized that being on the roof was not going to be a sanctuary; it was actually going to be where the phantom would trap and kill her. Thus, she refocused on getting to a safe place and fast. She noticed the four large water tanks on the roof, along with the ladder

mounted to the adjacent wall. Then a synapse of recollection fired in her brain: She remembered the movie *Dark Water*.”  
*What?!*

“Wait, wait, wait! Hold on, 33. Halt that hypothesis right there. How do you know that she ever saw the movie *Dark Water*? Do you have any proof of that? Has such been posted anywhere online?”

“Well, actually I don’t know that she ever saw it, 32, but just hear out my mindset theory. Then you can poke copious holes in it later on, my pscintillating pscanner.” [sic] *I bet that he will type up those last words with silent p’s. I can already see the Arial text.*

“Ok, continue, Professor Parkaar.” *Am I really sounding professorial?*

“With a Dutch double-ah?”

“Sure, why knot?” [sic] *I wonder if she meant not or knot ... or naught?*

“Ok, Elisa quickly scales the ladder and gets up onto the left rear water tank. This is where I think her mind shifted from escape and survive to commit suicide and end this nightmare – permanently.”

“Ok, keep going, 33. I’m following your lurid trail.” *I wonder if she knows that I have my digital audio recorder on.*

“Miss Lam then lifts the heavy hatch door with a rush of adrenaline. She then leaps down into the tank. Sadly, this is where her life ended. That would be my best guess.”

“You think you’ve got a water-tight theory, don’t you, 33?”

“It seems plausible to me, 32. I’m familiar with the psychedelic experience. I could see this playing out in her mind.” *Familiar with the psychedelic experience? How many times familiar?*

“You crazy American psychonaut!” [sic] Monique shouted. *Psychonaut?* “Your *great* theory leaves one thing wide open: the hatch door!”

“Wham, bam, and slam! Great observation, Monique. That’s one very important detail. I think that’s a wrap. Hungry?” *He obviously was recording our conversation. Again. I wonder when he’ll type it up and make copies. Will he post it on the psecret psociety Facebook page? Will he get my thoughts right this time? Oh, I think I need some more coffee.*

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Editorial note: This particular rooftop water tank’s hatch door was reportedly discovered in a closed, sealed position by the police.

### 37. **The Balcony** (December 2014)

We, Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33), checked into the Golden Sands Motel at Carolina Beach around noon on Thanksgiving Day 2014. We quickly learned that the motel actually consisted of two mid-rise oceanfront buildings.

A bored, oafish, 60-ish, Caucasian innkeeper assigned us to a room on the top floor of the taller north tower.

Very soon, we were on the elevator of the nearly vacant hotel building. Monique depressed the 7 button and up we went in the glass enclosure, watching the parking lot grow smaller.

When the elevator doors opened, I was staring at our room: 718. *Jeez, this is right where the elevator dumps out. Hope it doesn't get too loud tonight with holiday drunks.*

I double-checked the numerals on the door and turned to Monique. "Well, this it, hon."

"I'll open the door, honey," Agent 32 offered. "You have all that luggage in your hands."

"Salamat, mahal. ['Thank you, love' in Tagalog] You're a big help. Cute, too."

Monique smiled and quickly swiped the key card, got a green light, and opened the door. *That was easy.*

It was a nice room with a mini-fridge, microwave, coffee maker and hair dryer. The king-size bed was clean and quite

comfortable, as I promptly flopped down on it. I was quite tired from the 210-mile, four-plus-hour trek from Charlotte.

Monique wasn't ready for naptime just yet. "Don't fall asleep, my dearest kano. [kano, Filipino slang for American] You've got to check out this incredible view!"

I quickly got up from the bed and followed Monique through the sliding glass doorway, making sure to step over the door's lower trackway. It was a narrow balcony. The view, though, was ultra-expansive.

"Yeah, you're right, Monique; this is a million-dollar view. From far left to far right, nothing but Océano Atlántico. ['Atlantic Ocean' in Spanish] It's mega-maritime!" *Why is he talking in Spanish? Does he already have that darn audio recorder on?*

"Good pick, 33." *Good. She knows that I'm recording for a future short story.*

"Look, Agent 32, if you squint your eyes just right and stare straight out, you can see Rick's Café Américain in Casablanca."

"Casablanca? The place in that famous movie?"

"Yes, that place: Casablanca, Morocco." *He's teasing me. Surely he knows that I know that the Atlantic Ocean is far too vast to see across.*

"Parkaar, [my ailing alias] we can't see that far, even if it is a crystal-clear day."



“Just a geography pop quiz, asawa.” [wife in Tagalog and Cebuano] You passed.”

We both had a laugh. Some seagulls cawed as they flew by. Maybe they thought it was funny, too.

“Hey, my geography isn’t that bad, map freak,” Monique blurted out. *Map freak. There are worse things. We’d be better off with more map freaks.*

I chuckled. “All kidding aside, we are on about the same latitude as Casablanca.”

“Really?”

“Yep, yep, yep, as Mr. Malloy [a character in the novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco* and in the short stories *A Search for Sidle on N* and *Vermont Street*] would say. We are about 34 degrees north of the equator, give or take a few minutes to think about it.” *Give or take a few minutes to think about it? Yep, he’s definitely recording.*

We then got quiet and just stared out over the immense expanse of saltwater. A lone cloud cast a dark splotch on the languidly rolling blue-green surface. The sea was generally calm, but a few whitecaps could be seen about a mile out. *What a picture-perfect nautical scene.*

I then grabbed the top, white, plastic-covered, metal balcony railing and gave it a little shake. Thankfully, it was snug. No loose bolts or screws.

“What in the world are you doing, 33?!” Monique exclaimed.

“Just making sure it is secure. You can never trust these railings. People die from balcony falls every year.”

“You’re always Mr. Safety, aren’t you?” *Safe Tea?*

“Well, I’ve just read and seen the horror stories over the years, Agent 32.”

Monique then peered over the top railing, looking straight down, and then promptly stepped back. “Whew!”

“Higher than you thought?”

“Yes, 33, way higher than I thought. And, that pool down there has no water in it.”

“So, no risk of drowning if your dive goes flat.”

“Very funny, Parkaar. But, if we fall from here ... splat!”

“Yeah, we’re dead for sure if we fall from this height. We’re probably 70 feet up.”

“Yikes, that’s over 20 meters!” [65.6 feet]

“I don’t think I could stay in a room like this with a toddler.”

“Oh, yeah, they could climb up on a chair or table, and then get up to the top railing, and then ...”

“Yep. Up and over – and gone. Finito bambino. [‘Finished baby’ in Italian] Tragically, it has happened.”

“Is this railing at the proper height, mahal? It seems too low.”

“Yeah, the top rail appears to be 42 inches high. That’s all it has to be by building code.”

“If this were my hotel, I think I would have taller balcony railings, 33.”

“Yeah, I agree, Inspector 32. I think I would make them 54 inches tall. Less chance of a fatal mishap.”

“Or, why not just run the vertical bars all the way from the floor to the ceiling?” *That’s a grand idea.*

“Uh, maybe the fire code. Maybe cost. Or, maybe it prevents guests from launching large paper airplanes.” *Large paper airplanes? He’s just talking for a future story once again.*

“Large paper airplanes? What in the world are you talking about now, 33?”

“You know, Monique, the kind that can soar all the way to Lisbon on a nice spiral toss in an offshore breeze.” *To Portugal? That’s in Europe. Totally bonkers! He’s just testing my geographical knowledge yet again. I’m not falling for it this time.*

“Or, maybe all those vertical bars ruin the view, huh?”

“Well, you can still see through the four-inch-wide gaps in the balusters, 32.”

“Baluster’s ball-busters, 33!”

We both guffawed. Her smile was so genuine and pure. *Wonder how this night will go. Sinfully sublime, me thinks.*

“Nice spare coinage, Monique.”

“You liked that one, 33?” *Might as well call him by his agent number, as it’s obvious that he has the DAR [Digital Audio Recorder] on.*

“Yes, indeed. Very creative. That’s good stuff, 32.”

“You want some really good stuff, 33?” Monique asked with a sexy grin. *She’s already horny.*

“Sure, but just let me hit the krapper-kapper. [sic] [commode] Hold that pose.”

“Please try to take less than two hours this time, 33.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I headed to the bathroom. *I might as well get online and check Facebook. He’ll be in there for at least 22 minutes. Why did I just think 22 minutes, and not an even 20? His numerical madness has infiltrated my brain.*

Monique sat in the desk chair and got her tablet computer connected wirelessly to the internet.

While on the white porcelain throne, I heard our hotel room door open. *What the hell!*

But, before I could speak or move, the door shut. I never heard anyone enter the room.

“Who was that, hon?” I shouted through the bathroom door. “Is everything ok?”

“It was some Latino man with short black hair, asking if our balcony needed repairs. He saw me in my panties!”

I jumped up off the toilet and opened the door. “What the fock! [*sic*] Did he look like a motel employee?”

“I don’t know, hon.”

I quickly exited the bathroom. Monique looked shocked. I hugged and consoled her. Then I locked the dead bolt and called the front desk.

“Hey, listen, did you send a maintenance worker up to our room?”

“No, I most certainly did not,” the desk clerk said.

“Well, some guy entered our room, and the door was locked. It freaked my wife out. How many people have key cards to room 718?”

“Only you and your wife, sir. What did this guy look like?”

“My wife says that he was medium build with short black hair, perhaps Hispanic. Do you have any idea who that would be?”

“No, I don’t, sir. Wait a minute; I’ll check with our maintenance supervisor and call you back.”

“Ok, thanks.”

“So very sorry about that, sir.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

I hung up the desk phone and turned to my wife. “The hotel manager is going to check around and find out who that was. Probably just a misdirected maintenance worker, hon.” *I sure hope so.*

“Is it safe to stay here, honey?”

“Yeah, I think so, Monique.”

The man at the front desk never called back.

That night I had a terrifying dream of a Mexican construction worker falling from our balcony. It happened as the crew was nearing completion of the building. Apparently the worker tripped over something (the sliding door’s trackway?), hit a sawhorse on the balcony, and flipped over the railing, which he frantically grabbed to save himself. The last scene of the dream was of him falling down, looking up at me, with a piece of railing in his hand.

I jerked my arms, bumping Monique. She woke up, too.

“Hon, did you have a nightmare?” she sleepily asked.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

We soon drifted back asleep. The remainder of the night was dreamless for me. As for Monique, she was out like a lamb. *Or lamp?*

Upon checking out, the hotel desk clerk, a white, middle-age lady today, said that she heard that someone died in a

Carolina Beach hotel's construction, but wasn't sure if it was our building.

"Well, never trust your life to a balcony railing," I said as we began to walk away.

### 38. **Found Note** (February 2015)

Fred Wozinski had recently moved from Brooklyn to Charlotte. The twenty-five-year-old Caucasian IT tech had scored a plum gig with an uptown data analytics company. He was liking his new town, and had even met a local girl at a bar in the century-old Elizabeth neighborhood, where his apartment was conveniently located.

One quiet Saturday winter afternoon, while unpacking the remaining boxes in the guest bedroom, he opened the small closet door to check for available storage space. Luckily, it offered up enough room to push those never-seem-to-get-opened boxes inside.

Before closing the closet door, he noticed an odd, slightly raised, rectangular shape under the ancient beige wallpaper, about five feet above the pockmarked hardwood floor. For a moment he wondered why anyone would want to wallpaper a tiny closet. Then he ran his left hand over the offset surface. It felt like metal underneath the wallpaper. He then wondered if the closet had an overhead light at some time in the past, and if this was where the switch once was.

He felt the area of relief closer, detecting what seemed like a keyhole. He ran his left index fingernail vertically over it to confirm his suspicion. Curiosity then got the better of Fred.

He retrieved an Xacto knife from his little gray tool box (that was actually a converted tackle box), and began to neatly cut out the 2" x 4" rectangle of wallpaper over the raised object. After cutting right along the edges of the protrusion, he picked at a corner of the cut piece of yellowing wallpaper, trying to peel it back. The backing adhesive had lost most of its hold over the years; the wallpaper cutout was quickly



removed, revealing an inset, black, tin box. There was a door on it, and sure enough, it was locked.

However, Fred wasn't going to stop now. He found a large paper clip on his desk and began to reshape it. Seventy-seven seconds later, his impromptu skeleton key had tripped the little lock's single tumbler. He pulled the door's left edge open with his fingertips. Inside there was a severely-browned-by-age piece of paper with cursive handwriting, folded into sixths.

Fred cautiously retrieved it and brought it into the living room where there was more light. He carefully unfolded the little note. Some small edge pieces of the old paper crumbled off. Fred then flattened the note on the coffee table. He used his granddad's old magnifying glass to read:

*February 5, 1929*

*About four inches of snow fell today in Charlotte. My friend, Jim Royster, seemed to think that it might set a record for this date. Well, I guess you can check on that in the latest weather almanac (do you still have those?). A slow Tuesday. Work at the lumber mill ceased, so I came home early with a novel idea in my head. I would begin a little short story (yes, you are reading it right now!) and later hide it somewhere for someone to find (i.e., you!) at a hopefully much later date. A date after I'm dead and gone. Yes, I'll hide this piece of paper somewhere that will be found after my imminent passing. You see, my heart is failing me, even though I'm only forty-nine. My dad died early – only made it to forty-five. But, back to this noteworthy endeavor. I wonder who will find this note (who are you? what is your life like?), and exactly when will they (you) find it (is it the 21<sup>st</sup> century now? did this little note stay hidden that long? is it still legible?). Well, you've found it, serendipitous reader. Now it's your turn to add a paragraph or two. Go ahead; don't be the one who severs the tale. It'll be the longest 'short' story*

*ever written, because it will never end. I have the utmost faith in you. I just know that you're the type to continue this time-traveling missive. Transfer my words onto your paper (what kind of paper do you now have?) and add two hundred more! Credit, date, then hide.*

*Mirth and mystery,*

*Dave Adst*

Fred nearly spit out his hot Herbal Gerbil tea. He was quite shocked by the curious little note. He immediately googled the keywords *Dave Adst* and *Charlotte, NC* and learned that Dave did indeed live on Lamar Avenue in Elizabeth; was born on January 23, 1880 and died of cardiac arrest on May 17, 1929.

Fred was now even more intrigued by the old note that gave instructions for its survival. He then researched Jim Royster, and saw that one Jim Royster from Charlotte died on July 19, 1934 of consumption. Fred thought: *Wow, Dave didn't experience the October '29 stock market crash or the ensuing Great Depression; it was all the roaring 20s for him. But, his buddy Jim sure did. I wonder if they are aware of me now, at this moment. Well, what should I do? This is too good not to continue. I could make a dozen or so copies to hide around Charlotte. That would greatly increase the chances of this story continuing after I'm dead. I'll place copies in nooks, crannies, cavities and voids that won't be breached by my contemporaries. I'll make sure that the notes won't be found until the buildings are razed. Wait, is that 'too' hidden? Hmmm ... I wonder if Dave wrote more than one note. Are others already playing this paragraph-every-eighty-six-years short-story 'game'? Hmmm ... I should google the note's exact words. Verbatim.*

Fred then did just that on his tablet computer, but nothing came up related to Dave Adst.

Fred's mind started to churn some more. *Ok, maybe this is the only such note that Dave wrote. Ok, what in the world should I write? He asks for a paragraph or two. Two hundred words. Hmmm ... I know – I will just mention the note's discovery, today's weather and my job. Must remember to date it.*

Fred then transcribed Dave's text onto a white sheet of 20-pound printer paper and then added a succinct, six-sentence paragraph, which read:

Hello fellow note discoverer!

I found the above note today – today being February 7, 2015 – in a hidden wall compartment in my Lamar Avenue apartment. I initially thought that the inset metal compartment was a light switch junction box. Boy was I surprised when I opened the locked door to find Mr. Adst's message from 1929. And, who was the US president on February 5, 1929? Why, it was still Calvin Coolidge for another month. (Herbert Hoover was sworn in on March 5, 1929. And, yes, I had to look it up.)

Well, weather-wise, no snow today here in Charlotte. A cold below-freezing start to the day (frost on the grass), but I think it will warm to the mid-60s.

As for my occupation, well, I don't work in a lumber yard. No lumber yards around here anymore. I work in the IT (Information Technology) field. I don't think that Dave would have been familiar with that. And, if this note is found five-plus

decades from now, I'm sure that I'll have no idea of some of the job fields in your present time.

Well, serendipitous note reader, let's not disappoint Dave. Add your two-hundred-word addendum and hide strategically. Lengthen his legacy.

Enigmatically,

- Fred Wozinski

Later that day he made thirteen copies of the newly expanded tale. He folded and rolled them, and then placed each one in a 35mm film canister. Before placing the cap back on, he applied a thin bead of silicone sealant to keep water and moisture out.

That evening he began hiding the encapsulated, scrolled, two-note short stories. He hid the first one in the tin box (but kept Dave's original note). The second copy went into a picnic table's seat pipe in Independence Park. The third, in a wall crevice behind Starbucks on East 7<sup>th</sup> Street at Pecan Avenue.

And the strange wandering Asian lady ... well, she saw him.

### 39. **A Trek to Zeke's Island** (March 2015)

Back in mid-September of 1986, the late, ever-so-great, sprightly Agent 107 (Frank von Peck) and I traversed the 4,800-foot-long, crumbling, stone-and-concrete breakwater from Federal Point (just south of Fort Fisher, NC) to Zeke's Island, a large estuarine sand shoal near the mouth of the Cape Fear River.

The other day, lo, hi and behold, I found an old cassette tape (remember those?) in a drawer of an oaken chest that had captured the audio from our twenty-two-minute walk on that five-star day. What follows is a condensed version of the transcript.

Future Agent 33 (me): "Well, do you think we have everything, Frank?"

[the sound of a pickup truck door closing]

Future Agent 107 (Frank): "Man, we've got enough food and drink for two days. When does high tide come in?"

33: "It's been going out for the last two-and-a-half hours. We'll be fine. The water level will still be going down, even when we come back."

107: "You had better be right. I don't want to be stranded on that island overnight."

33: "Afraid of Blackbeard's ghost, are we?"

107: "No, I just have stuff to do."

[only the sound of seagull caws and splashing water for several minutes]

33: "Now, watch your step in this breach. These rocks are slippery, especially the green mossy areas."

107: "You just figured that out? Listen, I'll be fine. We just need to worry about you."

33: "Are you feeling anything yet?"

107: "Just feeling high adventure."

33: "Wow! Those clouds down the river ... they seem to be wavering ever so slightly, like on that day last year with Slim at Wrightsville Beach."

107: "Oh, not already. We've just started this rock-hopper."  
[sic]

33: "Rare coinage, dude. That's definitely what we're doing."

107: "I wonder when this jetty was built."

33: "It's a breakwater, Frank. A jetty just juts and a breakwater breaks ... the water."

[splash]

107: "A jetty just juts? You've lost another marble, dude. Maybe your last one."

33: "I still have three or four left."

[both of us are laughing]

107: "So, what's the story behind this breakwater?"

33: "Well, Frank, back in 1873, they wanted to make New Inlet vanish, which they did, to keep a deep Cape Fear River channel for oceangoing ships."

107: "Hmmm ... 1873. Hey, did you just pluck a year out of the air?"

33: "I'm not a magician in this kind of weather."

107: "How do you know that it was built in 1873?"

33: "I placed the last stone with my bare hands. I was there with the Corps of Engineers. It was epic, Frank. Make that epik [*sic*] with a hard Germanic k." [chuckling]

107: "Already getting silly, I see. Great. Just frigging [*sic*] great."

33: "Ok, I'll divulge my source. I saw 1873 mentioned in a pamphlet in the gift shop at the museum."

107: "What museum?"

33: "The one next to the seafood restaurant with the cannon out front."

107: "You've already lost your mind. That was not a restaurant; that was Fort Fisher, you flipping fool."

33: "I was just testing you, Frank. You gobbled up the bait."

[more seagull caws and the sound of wind gusts for about ten seconds]

107: "Test this, dude."

[the sound of coughing]

33: "We're already to the first bend, Frank. We're making good time. We should be there by midnight."

107: "Fawk [*sic*] you. I'm not going to be on this sinking pile of rocks after dark."

33: "Why not? It would make the high tide more exciting."

107: "Forget it. That's a tragedy in the making if I ever heard one."

33: "Ever think that it's all a tragedy in the making?"

107: "You're bringing me down, dude. You need to elevate your thoughts above the waterline."

[some more coughing with some wind gusts]

33: "Do you think that you could swim across this lagoon?"

107: "Sure, if I had to. But, that's not a lagoon; it's an estuary basin. I thought you studied maritime geology in college? Were you sleeping in on that day? Didn't you study coastal features?"

33: "Uh, yeah ... I guess I did. Hey, let's swim it!"

107: "Nah, I'll pass. But, you can go ahead and drown if you like. I'll wave to you as you go under for the third time."

33: "So much for high aqua-adventure. Hey, you're right: Sometimes it does appear that this rocky trail is sinking, doesn't it?"

107: "You need to get a grip. Don't wig out until we're back on land, or dry sand."

33: "I'm not wiggling out; I'm just having a laugh. Ha-ha. Ah-ha-ha."

107: "Do you think we're over halfway there yet?"

33: "Over halfway to where?"

107: "To Zeke's Island! You know, the intended destination."

33: "We're close. There's the turn for home. Relax. We're going to make it. The crowd is cheering."

[several minutes of no one talking with just the sounds of splashing water and wind gusts]

107: "I'll race you the last hundred feet. I'll stay in the left lane; you stay in the right."

33: "Excuse me, pal o' mine, but I don't see any lane markings."

107: "Just stay on the right side of this linear rock pile."



33: "I'll forfeit the race for the sake of personal safety. Thus, you win. What do I owe you?"

107: "You owe me a gold coin."

33: "Well, who knows, Frank, there may be some buried gold on Zeke's Island. Did you pack a spade?"

107: "No, just a club."

33: "Ha-ha. Now that's genuinely hilarious. Good one, Frank. You clubbed that low-hanging fruit. You punctured that plump piñata. You made that cute girl smile."

107: "What cute girl?"

33: "The one in that cheeseball dance club last night at Carolina Beach."

107: "The short brunette?"

33: "Yes, her. That sexy rod-popper."

107: "Was she looking at me?"

33: "All the freaking time, man. All the freaking night. You should have made a peck move on her, captain."

107: "I don't know; I think she was with the bartender."

[sounds of the wind howling for several minutes]

33: "Well, we've made it to Zeke's Island. It wasn't that bad; now, was it, Captain Stacks?"

107: "No, it really wasn't. But, at full high tide, it may be a different story."

33: "It's always a different story, Frank ... until you find out that you've just retraced a deceased person's pattern."

107: "Man, lay off the morbidity. We're still alive, dude."

33: "You think so?"

107: “Oh, pleeeeeease. Please do come back to Earth at once, Astronaut Mike.”

[the sound of a helicopter passing overhead]

33: “Oh, crap! They’ve found us, Frank. Put your hands up before the snipers take us out.”

107: “Stop freaking out, man. Put your hands down. You’re going to get them to land over here if you don’t stop. What’s wrong with you?”

33: “Ah, they’re on a training mission. Probably headed back to Camp Lejeune. They don’t have time for our nonsense.”

[about two minutes of no one talking]

107: “Does the other side of this island front the Atlantic Ocean?”

33: “No, there are a series of tidal creeks and marshy shoals between us and the deep blue sea. If you want to hang out on that deserted beach, you’ll have to get wet.”

107: “Hey, let’s do it! If the creeks are less than four feet deep, we can keep the dry stuff dry, by holding the knapsacks over our heads.”

33: “Wait, are you for real?”

107: “Yes! C’mon, man. Don’t wuss out on me.”

33: “Ok, sport. Keep heading this way.”

[several minutes of just walking sounds and the wind howling]

107: “Well, here’s our first crossing, dude. The middle looks less than three feet deep. We can do this.”

[no more voices or sounds, just tape hissssssssss]

#### 40. Vermont Street (April 2015)

We, Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33), decided to check out San Francisco's second-most curvy street – the largely unheralded Vermont Street – before the Giants-Padres game on Wednesday, August 24, 2011. I remember thinking at that time: *A psecret psociety pshort pstory [sic] could come out of this.* And, of course, I had my DAR (Digital Audio Recorder) running on a fresh charge.

It was a quiet, uneventful, still-foggy, noontime, mid-week N Judah train ride from our two-star Outer Sunset motel to the subterranean Civic Center MUNI station. Once there we exited and walked up to Market Street to the sound of drums and the sight of beaming sunlight. *Darn, I preferred the fog and overcast sky.*

At the route 19 bus stop on 8<sup>th</sup> Street, we saw the source of the percussive reverberations: a bright-red-vested street musician with a dozen miniature drums of various types strapped to his body. *What an odd act. Only in San Francisco.*

The 40-something, brown-bearded, portly Caucasian dude billed himself as Beat the Con-Un-Drum. He actually seemed to have some rhythm. I placed several silver coins in his black top hat. *Maybe import him to an MLS match in Portland. Pso psinfully psyncopated. [sic]*

Then a mid-to-late-60-ish, white-haired, Caucasian guy of slight build, sporting an SF (Giants) baseball cap, walked up to the bus stop. Monique surveyed him. I spoke first.

“Going to the game tonight?”

“Yep, yep, yep. Malloy never misses a home game. Well, not since the big earthquake.” *Wow! It’s him. The real Malloy.* [The Mr. Malloy character also features in the novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco* as well as the short story *A Search for Sidle on N.*]

“The one in 1906, Mr. Malloy? Hey, I’m just kidding. Just having a laugh. We’ll be there, too. Great to see you again after nineteen years.”

“Likewise and wise-like,” Malloy said. “So, where are you two wily wascals [*sic*] going now?”

“We’re going to check out Vermont Street – the serpentine section,” I said. “Ever been there?”

“Many times. Many, many times. We used to roll old bowling balls down that street back in ’79. We invented a game. Even had a league. The Potrero Hill Potatoes was our team’s name.” *Huh?*

“The Potrero Hill Potatoes?” I asked out of bemusement.

“Yep, yep, yep. We would call our heavily gouged bowling balls potatoes, as they would wobble like misshapen spuds. Yep, yep, yep.”

“Ok. So, how did the game work?” I was very curious to know what kind of street game a younger Malloy would partake in.

“It was uh ... well, it was kind of like bowling, but with just one pin at the end of the run. Play would start about a hundred feet south of 20<sup>th</sup> Street, just before the switchbacking descent. Yep, yep, yep. We would chalk a foul line across the street. The object was to bowl your team’s ball down the street, alternating bowlers, in as few bowls as possible to set up for the first easy shot at the lone pin. Whenever the ball touched – or jumped – the curb, it was out of bounds and a chalk mark was scratched where the ball struck or jumped the curb. The next bowl would then be from that spot, and so on until someone knocked down the pin at the bottom of the zig-zigging slope.” *Wow!*

“Sounds pretty cool, Malloy,” I said.

“As in K-E-W-L? That’s the hepcat way to spell it. I invented that spelling long before the hipsters of today.” *I doubt that, but I won’t challenge him on it.*

“Ok, I’ll make a note of that.” I then looked down and saw the green light on the DAR (Digital Audio recorder) inside my shirt pocket. *Excellent. It’s on. We got that recorded.*

“Let me tell you something. [I immediately thought of the Durutti Column song when he said that.] Yep, it was one helluva [*sic*] game. We would hoot and holler. The neighbors despised us at first, but we won most of them over; they became epic all-leaguers.” [*sic*] *What?!*

“How did your team do?” *I bet Malloy was on the misfit team.*

“We won a few Saturday night extra-spatials.” [*sic*] *What the hell did he just say?*

“Extra-spatials or extra-specials?” I calmly asked, seeking some clarification.

“Yep, yep, yep. We lost in the quarter-finals, though. Won a ribbon or something. I think Ed has it now. Late at night was the only safe time to bowl.”

“I see. Did any bowling balls ever hit any people, cars or houses?”

“No, not that I am aware of. Bowlers were spaced up and down the hill, wearing thick gloves and steel-toed shoes. However, we did lose a ball one night. I never heard it hit anything. It just quietly disappeared in a hairpin turn.”

“Did that cost your team a penalty? Did your team have to forfeit the match?”

“Yeah, I think we lost that round. Yep, yep, yep.” *He sure still loves to say, ‘yep, yep, yep’. Nothing has changed on that*

*count. It must drive his wife insane. Or, maybe he has no wife now.*

The orange-and-white, freshly washed MUNI bus pulled up to the bus stop. We all got on, but Malloy sat up front and we drifted to the back. *Maybe we should have sat behind him and just kept the DAR running. There's a novel in that guy. Make that three. At least.*

Malloy got off at Mariposa. Monique, who had been mute thus far, then spoke up.

"I wonder what his life story is, Parkaar." [my ailing alias]

"Oh, it's probably an interesting tale, Monique. A most propitious tale, no less." *What?*

"Propitious?"

"Yeah. You know, he won the state lottery back in '90 or '91. That lucky bastard." I chuckled. "But, he likes to appear near-destitute as he wanders around San Francisco, muttering 'yep, yep, yep.' What a life."

"Ah, well, there goes the rich man in disguise," Monique said as she looked back at Malloy one last time as the bus pulled away.

"Yep, yep, yep," I said as Malloy-esque as I could manage.

Monique laughed. "You almost sound like him."

“Well, maybe in good time.” *‘Good’ time?*

We had a chuckle and then quieted down. It was a splendid day by the bay (even if the sun was very bright now).

Two minutes later, I pulled down on the stop-request cable. The sign illuminated and the bell dinged.

“Well, this is our stop, Agent 32.” *He obviously has his DAR on. That’s the only time he calls me ‘Agent 32’.*

We got off at 20<sup>th</sup> Street. We were now on Rhode Island Street. Vermont Street was only two blocks to the west.

“Well, Monique, it’s just a short walk from here.”

“Ok, lead the way, Parkaar.”

“I like how you pronounced the Dutch double-ah, sexy Agent 32.”

“You always say that, 33.” *She’s right. I’ve probably worn that groove out. I’ve worn everything out. My mind is worn out. My time is worn out.*

“Are you sure that your great maternal grandfather wasn’t Dutch, Monique?”

“Maybe Spanish or Chinese, but probably not Dutch.”



Soon we were on Vermont Street, looking down at the series of curves through the cypress trees. *What an über-super-duper [sic] street.*

“Well, this is it, 32: the other curvy street in San Francisco that some say is more crooked than the famous Lombard Street on Russian Hill. Want to walk down it?”

“Sure. But, let me take a picture here first.”

“Yeah, sure, go ahead. It’s some view.”

Monique then got her cell phone out of her handbag and snapped a few pics at the top of the hill. We walked down the sidewalk to the bottom of the curvaceous section, occasionally stopping to snap some more photos.

“What is that green space over there, 33?”

“It’s McKinley Square. Want to check it out?”

“Sure. Why not? We’ve got time, right?”

“Yeah, plenty of time before the gates open for the game.”

We then began walking up a trail that roughly paralleled the sinuous section of Vermont Street. About halfway up, Monique stopped, needing a water break. She gulped down some mineral water from Iceland. (I noticed the text on the bottle’s label.)

While Monique was drinking the Icelandic glacier water, I looked down at an evergreen shrub. There seemed to be something bulging under its mulch. I bent down and brushed the mulch and thin layer of earth away to reveal a third of an old, black bowling ball. I used a nearby stick to dig around it. Three minutes later I had the ball extricated.

I held up the old, chipped, black bowling ball like a trophy and made a pronouncement. "Well, Agent 32, I truly believe that this is the one that got away from Malloy's gang."

"Maybe so, 33. Does it have any deep gouges in it?"

I twirled it around in my hands, and sure enough it had some chasms of missing plastic.

"It sure does," I said, noticing a jet flying overhead at a low altitude. *Wonder if any of the passengers on that airliner can see me. If so, are any of the window-seat passengers now saying to a middle-seat passenger, 'There's some guy holding up a bowling ball down there.' Oh, why do I think such ridiculous things?*

"Yes, I would bet that that is Malloy's missing bowling ball," Monique said. *That that.*

"Yeah, this has got to be the one that went AWOL [absent without leave] thirty-two years ago."

"It really does look about three decades old, Parkaar."

“What should I do with it, 32?”

“I’d just leave it right there, 33.”

“Oh, I know ... I’ll leave it in the playground.”

“A small child may get hurt by it.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, 32. Hmm ... I’ll just let it roll down this open area towards US 101.”

“Are you crazy, Agent 33?! It might hit a hiker or jogger. It could be rolling fast enough to kill someone. Do you want to be charged with murder for some silly stunt and serve ten years in a California prison?”

“Uh, no, I most certainly don’t, Monique. But, I don’t see anyone – not a soul ... anywhere.” *And, he’s a safety guy?*

“You’re not really going to do it, are you?” *Please don’t.*

“I think it will be ok. There’s no one in harm’s way. And, there’s no chance of it reaching the freeway. It will be fun to video it bouncing down the dusty slope.” *Fun? He’s getting loonier by the minute.*

Monique sighed and relented. “Ok, go ahead. But, if it strikes and kills someone ...”

“Yep, yep, yep.”

We watched – and videoed – the old, deformed bowling ball bounce down the nearly grassless, barren hillside, spinning up a cloud of trailing dust. It then careened off a cedar tree trunk near the bottom of the slope and disappeared into some low brush. *Thank God that no one got hit by it. I hope that he's done with the crazy stunts now.*

“It's gone now, 33.”

“Maybe someone will find it in 2043.” *Probably way before then, but who knows?*

- Game Note: SDP 1 SFG 2

#### 41. **Beanstreets** (April 2015)

Back in 1998, when I lived alone in a 907-square-foot camper-to-house conversion on High Peak Mountain (actually more of a low ridge than a prominent peak) in Etowah (NC), I would often take a 31-mile drive to Asheville on Friday afternoons after my safety writing was done. Once I had parked my white 1991 Plymouth Voyager minivan in the 'pearl of the Blue Ridge', I would ensconce me-self for several hours in a lower level, worn-but-extra-soft, gold-colored chair at Beanstreets coffeehouse at the corner of College and Broadway.

Beanstreets was a hit with the locals – a certified caffeinated cerebral power pumper (oh, yeah) – winning best coffee shop year after year through the '90s. Thus, I figured it would be a good place to start my first novel (though, actually my first novel, *Gold, a summer story*, would not come about until 15 years later in Charlotte). I already had the title in my head; it would be called *Monique by the Creek* (hasn't yet become a novel, but did become a short story; not sure what drive it is stored on).

Let me tell ya, this Beanstreets joint had a world-class chill about it. Once nestled in the back catacombs, I often felt like I was back in San Francisco. And on this overcast April day, the interior scene was no exception. The usual kewl, [*sic*] hip, casual ambiance pervaded the multilevel confines.

At a table three feet above me (yes, up a yard in elevation), there were two young customers, a white and a black guy, playing a strange version of chess with coins. *What is a rook? Two nickels?*

Near the front counter, two 20-something females, an Asian and a Caucasian, were comparing notes on poetry. Or, maybe it was song lyrics. *The next female folk-rock duo?*

And, at a table about seven feet to my right was a 50-ish Caucasian fellow donning a brown beret. He was talking to two guys and a girl, who appeared to be college students.

Luckily for me (and you, my highly esteemed voracious reader), I had my analog audio recorder on my person, just to make sure that I could later transcribe their conversation precisely. I flipped the switch to ON, slid it in my shirt pocket, and began to earnestly eavesdrop on their conversation.

The 50-something white guy was already in mid-speech, sounding very professorial. “And, get this, according to the current standard model of cosmology, the observable universe – you know, the part of the whole shebang that we can detect, containing all the billions of galaxies and trillions upon trillions of zillions of stars – is just one of an infinite number of universes existing side-by-side, like soap bubbles

in a foamy, spiraling bath tub.” *Now, there’s an interesting theory. I sure picked the right table to record.*

The 20-something, Caucasian, dirty-blonde-haired, maroon-and-white-sweatshirted female then had a follow-up question. “A spiraling bath tub?”

But, before the older man could offer a reply ...

“Hey, what if some entity pulls the drain plug on it, professor?” the 20-something, Caucasian, dark-long-haired, tall male asked.

“Yes, what if, indeed?” the older bereted gentleman asked. “And, yes, Lori – spiraling all around, becoming braided together.” *He must have tenure at UNCA. [University of North Carolina at Asheville]*

They all had a chuckle. *Cosmic humor. They are probably from a cosmology, astronomy or astrophysics class.*

“Sounds like scary end-of-times stuff,” the other white, shorter, short-brown-haired male student said.

“I tend to think it would be very exciting, John. Watch that wormhole! Don’t get too close to the grommet zone. Watch those loose electrons!”

“Grommet zone?” Lori, asked. She continued her line of questioning. “But, professor, why and how can this be?”

“Because it is all infinite, Lori. Every single possible history must have played out ... somewhere, sometime and somehow. All the many permutations and combinations. All of them.” The professor then glanced my way for a millisecond. He had detected my interest in their conversation.

“Sounds like infinite imprecision to me,” John said.

“Well, hold on, John. Actually, the number of possible histories is finite, because there have been a finite number of events with a finite number of outcomes. Oh, the number is astronomically huge, but it is finite, nonetheless. Trust me on this. I stayed up all night calculating it.”

“I bet you did,” Bill said. He chuckled for three seconds.

Lori giggled. “Oh, professor, you’re too much!”

The prof smiled. “That’s not what the wife says, Lori.” *Wow, wasn’t expecting that.*



They all had another chortle. John almost spilled his coffee. The professor coughed a few times.

Bill, the long-haired student, restarted their astronomical discussion. “Ok, so what you’re saying now is that this conversation here at this point in space-time ...”

“Yes, go ahead, Bill,” the professor encouraged. “Keep running with the universal ball. Put it over the goal line this time. All of the cosmos is counting on you.”

“Gosh, that’s a lot of pressure, professor,” Bill leaked out.

“You can do it! Reason it out. You have a good brain, Bill.”  
*Did they examine it under an electron microscope?*

Bill took a deep breath and sighed. “Ok. Well, is this *now* – this present – any more significant than any other parallel-universe present moment?”

“Good question, Bill. Correction: That’s a great question. Your thinking is crisply keen today.”

“But, what’s allowed to be this *present* moment, professor?”  
Lori then asked.

“Another great question, Lori. Are you guys always this sharp-witted at Beanstreets? Or, is it only when I’m buying the coffee?”

They all laughed. *Quite a jolly astro-bunch, they are.*

The professor continued. “Ok, yes, we must set boundaries, unless the boundaries are actually borderline events themselves.”

“Borderline events?” John was startled by that term. “I think I need a chart for all of this, professor.”

“Maybe an interlocking Venn diagram, John?” the professor suggested. “Hey, remember the famous poem by Robert Frost?”

“Which one?” Lori asked.

“The one with the line, ‘good fences make for good event aggregators’,” the professor said. *Good event aggregators? What the fuque! [sic]*

“Very funny, professor,” Lori said. “However, I think the line is good fences make good neighbors.”

“And, they just might, Lori,” he replied. “They just might.”

“Ok, you’ve lost me again, professor,” Bill sheepishly said.

“Listen, Bill; I’ve lost myself, too, on more than one occasion. For two whole weeks at Humboldt State. Or, was that years?” The professor chuckled for a few seconds.

Bill took another sip of his light brown coffee. “Ok, let me give this a try. So, this exact event, where we speak, listen and think right now, must have happened, is happening, or will be happening a countless number of times.”

“Hey, who’s counting now?” the professor lobbed as he began to laugh uncontrollably.

“My lord, professor, is God really that bored?” Lori asked while twirling her bangles.

“It’s total tedium for the gods! It’s just not worth it anymore to be a deity, Lori.” The professor began laughing again.

They all joined him and erupted into a mighty group guffaw. After ten seconds, their heart rates and breathing stabilized.

The professor regained his composure and spoke first. “You three are one sharp group. Top of the class and top of the

league. I can tell that you will all be great theoretical physicists." *Ah, theoretical physics students.*

"You really think so?" John asked in a doubtful tone.

"Yes. Yes, I do. Just remember to accelerate your wildest macro theories." *What did he just say?*

"What did you just say?" John asked. *A mind echo in here.*

"Listen. Please listen closely, my terrific trio. We all know the world at the subatomic realm is wacky, right? Quantum physics and that probable-state stuff."

"Yes," Bill said, knowing his reply would just be a conjunctive segue.

"And, we know that our current laws work out fairly well at the human scale," the professor continued. "But, what about at the thousands-of-light-years-across macro scale?"

"Just thinking of such incredible distances makes me tired, professor," Lori said.

"Believe me, I wouldn't want to be on that bus, either, Lori," the professor said. He then cleared his throat and continued. "Wow, yeah, pass me another bottle of Sominex. Make it a

case. You would certainly have plenty of time to think ... of just about everything.”

“Yeah, no doubt about that,” Bill said.

“Imagine thoughts upon dreams upon notions, shimmed by whims. And to the 366<sup>th</sup> power!” *I think the old prof [sic] is missing a few hundred thousand neutrons ... or neurons.*

“Why 366?” Bill asked, suddenly very engaged again.

“Why not, Bill?” the professor asked semi-rhetorically. “A leap-light-year?” He chuckled once more. *What a bunch of scientific laughs. Did they inhale nitrous oxide before coming here?*

“Sure, professor,” Bill said, looking somewhat astounded.

“Ok, now ... and ok, then, if there are all of these alternate realities going on, what does that mean at the end of the day, select group?” the professor asked intently.

“It means that we’re going to need a whole lot more traffic signals and street lamps?” John cautiously submitted.

“Good one, John. Great answer. Stellar, in fact and in fiction.” *And in fiction? Was that just an off-hand dismissal.*

Lori shyly posited an answer, too. “We all have doubles out there?”

“Wow! You got it, Lori,” the professor said with verve. “It’s a doppelgänger bonanza across the universe. In all of them. And, amazingly, we can work out how far away our nearest doppelgänger is.”

“How far away is my nearest other-me?” Lori asked, very curious to know. *Maybe she fears that her doppelgänger is wearing the same clothes?*

“Not that close, Lori. Nothing to worry about it. To put it mildly, a very, very, very long distance away. How far? Try 10 to the power of 10 to the power of 29 yards ... or meters if you prefer, as we are in the States. And, that number, in case you were wondering, is one followed by 10 billion, billion, billion zeroes. McDonald’s hasn’t even put that many grams of fat into the collective human gut yet.” *Yuck!*

“Good, that’s far enough away,” Lori said as she laughed. *I think that I guessed her concern correctly.*

Their conversation carried on, but when I glanced in my shirt pocket, I saw a blinking yellow light on the top of my voice recorder. It would be dead in a matter of seconds. And since

my mug o' java was now empty, I figured that it was time to roll. *That sure was one interesting conversation. Hope it was recorded clearly enough to transcribe. Some good material for a short story someday.*

I got up for a refill to-go and walked towards the table with the professor and the three students. As I neared, they hushed their discussion, as if anticipating my interjection.

I looked at all of them, and then made eye contact with the professor. "What do you think about a *present* moment in 2015?"

That's exactly when my analog audio recorder cut off. I recall them asking me qualifying questions to my question, but I forget the exact wording. Bill – I believe it was Bill – asked why I picked the year 2015. And, I can't remember what I told him. I wished them luck with coming up with the next grand cosmic theory, and said goodbye.

I then walked up to the counter. The 30-something, bronze-skinned Brazilian barista asked, "Get an earful back there?"

"A story-ful," I said as I grabbed my refilled mug. I smiled at her and then walked towards the corner door.

It was almost dark outside. Car headlights whizzed by on Broadway. *Time sure flew by in there. Guess I was transfixed by their conversation. Didn't get much writing done. Oh, well. Maybe try again next week.*

As I drove towards High Peak on NC 191, I replayed fragments of their conversation in my head. And when I came upon the French Broad River flowing to my left in the Sandy Bottom area, oh, what a sublime moment. *Wow! What a day. Must write it up as soon as I get back home. Don't let this one float away.*

- Sad note: Beanstreets is now closed.



#### 42. **Bottled** (August 2015)

The prevailing topic of discussion the other day in our near-uptown, closer to midtown, heavily air-conditioned office (why, it's hot as hell in Charlotte in early August) was the old message-in-a-bottle bobbing literary motif. The other two agents with me pleaded to have their numbers changed to random symbols, and not have their names mentioned to protect their identities (for what reason eludes me). Yet, supreme ringleader Ernie (the electronic earwig) relented. Well, without further ado and undo, here's a transcript of our heady, steady conversation.

<click>

[the sound of some papers being shuffled on a desk, followed by the faint sound of the *Message in a Bottle* song by the English rock band The Police]

^|^: "Ah, Message in a Bottle. Haven't heard that one in a while."

~(~: [begins singing] "Sending out an S.O.S. Sending out an S.O.S. I'm sending out an S.O.S."

^|^: "Ok, enough. You're slaughtering that tune."

33 (me): "You have an S.O.S. situation – in grave distress with immediate danger to life and vessel – and you are going to launch a message in a bottle? That's bonkers! Completely nutzoid [*sic*] in a nutshell."

~(~: “Well, it’s just a pop song. And, he’s not on a sinking ship; he’s stranded on a deserted island. The guy is ready to immediately die from loneliness. It’s probably about Sting [lead singer for The Police] dying to be with a hot woman – a sexy lady like me. Yes, just some very excusable poetic license exercised, if you ask me.”

^|^: “Speaking of messages in bottles, did you hear about the one that turned up after Hurricane Sandy?”

[the sounds of coughing, throat-clearing and sneezing]

~(~: “The guy in coastal New Jersey who got back the note that he tossed in the drink when he was 12, back in 1963? [starts singing] Late December, back in '63 ...”

33: “Hey, hey, hey; you’re no epik [sic] all-leaguer singer.”  
*Epic all-leaguer singer? What does that mean?*

~(~: “And you’re not, either, 33.” *She’s completely right.*

^|^: “Will you two please stop it?! You are acting like coarse schoolkids in a fine trapezoidal sandbox.” *He must have read that line somewhere. / He stole that.*

33: “Trapezoidal? Never saw a trapezoid-shaped sandbox on any playground. Not once. Nowhere.”

~(~: “Stop playing for the recorder, dudes.”

^^: "Can we please get back on topic? Hurricane Sandy. Message in a bottle. Remember that?"

33: "Ok, ok, ok. Sure. Well, yeah; I forgot about that one: Dennis Komsa's message in a bottle. I believe that his was an ocean-current experiment that he did with his dad. I think that it washed up less than a quarter-mile from where he threw it in fifty years prior. Just tidal action, I would guess."

^^: "Correct-a-mundo. [*sic*] That's true, 33. But, actually, I was thinking of the one that a 10-year-old girl threw in, back in the fall of 2001, right after the 9-11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center."

~(~: "I remember her. I saw her story on the national news a few years ago. Sidonie Fery. She tossed her bottle into Great South Bay, off of Long Island, New York. And Hurricane Sandy washed it up in Patchogue."

^^: "You must have the fastest Google link in the world."

[laughter]

33: "There is something exhilarating and fascinating about launching a message in a bottle. Will it be fate or chance if/when the note is found and read?"

^^: "Unfortunately in this case, it was the intersection where fate and chance cross with tragedy."

33: "Oh, did something happen to her?"

^|^: "She died in 2010 in Switzerland, two and a half years before Sandy hit."

~(~: "Yeah, she was only eighteen years old."

33: "In Switzerland? Was she on vacation?"

^|^: "No, she was attending an American college over there. She fell off a cliff over 200 feet high after drinking some beer with a fellow student. He fell to his death, too."

33: "They both died together, at the same time?"

^|^: "I believe so. Maybe one of them started to slip and grabbed the other, pulling him/her off the precipice with them."

33: "Yeah, that's very tragic. Terrible."

~(~: "What about a joint suicide? You know, 1-2-3, jump!"

^|^: "Will you stop with all of the suicide theories!"

~(~: "Well, you can't rule it out, given the circumstances."

33: "What did her note say? Her message in the bottle."

^|^: "It read: 'Be excellent to yourself dude'. [Click [here](#) to see the actual note.]

~(~: "I think I've heard that quote before."

^|^: "Yeah, it's a quote from the movie *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. It was her favorite film at the time."

33: "Well, that sure is a nice positive note. Some good self-help advice. So many people mentally beating themselves up, day after day."

~(~: "Yeah, at least it didn't say, 'You wasted five minutes of your feckless life extricating this meaningless note from a bottle that last contained horse piss.' Or, something nasty like that."

33: "How ironically lovely and disgusting. But, I don't think many 10-year-olds do the message-in-a-bottle thing anymore. They are all on their tablet computers all day."

^|^: "Yeah, these days it would be a virtual message in a bottle tossed into cyberspace."

~(~: "I wonder if she thought that it would ever be found. And, I wonder if she ever thought about it while in Switzerland." *Or about a psecret psociety pshort pstory [sic] being written around it.*

33: "What are you getting at?"

^|^: "You think that she quickly forgot about it?"

~(~: “Probably after a few years, I would imagine. I know that when I was eighteen, I didn’t think about things that I did when I was ten. A girl’s life is in such a different phase then.”

33: “I wonder if she told anyone about her message in a bottle. Was it a secret?”

^|^: “If it was, it surely isn’t now. They even have a bronze plaque in her name in that town.”

~(~: “Now, I certainly doubt that she foresaw that – all the notoriety. Her story spread all over the world.”

33: “I know some friends and acquaintances who have died and, well, their internet presence lives on, in a ghostly kind of way.”

^|^: “What if, at some point in the future, our online presences – after we have physically died – automatically update based on a hyper-learning, ultra-intuitive algorithm?”

~(~: “Like a program that is so smart, it would write something just like we would write given a certain stimulus, such as a post or comment on a social network?”

^|^: “Yeah, something like that.”

33: “Or, what you guys just said.”

[laughter]

^|^: "And we would appear to be 'living' forever in the electronic binary realm."

33: "Wait, do you really have a pulse?"

~(~: "You know, guys, at some point in the future, the message in the bottle will be someone's whole existence in ones and zeros."

^|^: "And, it may not be static."

33: "Hey, we could put our conversation today on a thumb drive, and then drop it in a small bottle."

~(~: "Glass or plastic?"

^|^: "Glass could break."

33: "You would want to add a desiccant packet to keep the water vapor down."

~(~: "Absolutely."

^|^: "Ok, where do we launch our conversation?"

33: "Well, my wife, Agent 32, may be going to the Philippines next year. She will most likely be riding on a ferry in an area that has strong inter-island currents. She could 'accidentally' drop it overboard in mid-channel. It could go from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean very easily."

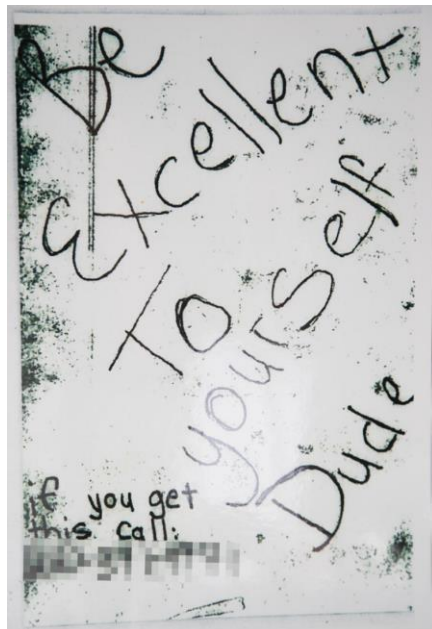
^|^: “Ah, yes, and wash up on Reunion Island. They might think it came from the Malaysian Airlines 777 that disappeared from radar back in March 2014.”

~(~: “You’re coo-coo. Bottled. Even worse than Jim.”

33: “Ok, I think this discussion is completely cooked now. This meeting is summarily adjourned.”

^|^: “Gimme that flash drive, 33. C’mon, hand it over.”

<click>



[Sidonie Fery's message-in-a-bottle]

Click [here](#) to return to story.



#### 43. **Portland Portent** (September 2015)

Way back in October of 1992, when I was 28 and feeling no pain in the brain (the shunt was behaving), I decided to take a trip from San Francisco to Portland. No, not for cement. And, no, not to Portland, Maine – to the city named after that one: the Rose City of Oregon. Hipsterville, USA, or <sploosh> Puddleville (a name derived from all the pools of water created by those oh-so-frequent wintertime rain showers).

The mode of travel would be a Greyhound bus. Yes, I was on an extra-lean budget (and still am). Even back then (before I ever ventured into the realm of creative writing), I knew that taking an overnight, west-coast bus trip would be interesting. Well, at least once. And, I should probably mention that I still had some of those tranquility-inducing, quasi-magical, Sidle on N granules.

The trip started around five on a Wednesday afternoon. The weather was tourist-enticing and postcard-perfect: sunny with a few clouds moving in; temperature: 75° F.

That bus seat felt more comfortable than imagined as we crossed the Bay Bridge. *Nice. I can do this.*

In Oakland, a short layover where the bus filled to about 60% of capacity. The mood was subdued and quiet. Everyone seemed to be tired from an active autumn day. Or, maybe they had just smoked too much weed. *Oaksterdam.*

Our route had us taking I-80 East to Sacramento. We arrived in the Golden State capital around 7:30 (I think). It was a 19-

minute layover as assorted people got on and off. It seemed like a net gain of 10. Ok, let's say 11 to keep this tale prime.

Soon, we were chugging north up I-5. Darkness dropped its drape (that sounds familiar) on the Central Valley. Thoughts wafted up to the overhead storage bins and tried to pick the luggage locks. And when we stopped at Red Bluff, things got, shall we say, varied and eenteresting. [*sic*]

Three notable (to this short story; everyone on that bus was notable, I am sure) persons climbed aboard: a pair of 50-something, Caucasian American, brown-haired, literary-inclined-looking females and a short Mexican American male in a white tank top, who must have been about 25 years old.

The two ladies sat down together across the aisle from me. They quickly got themselves situated and started to read and talk. I glanced over and noticed that the books were not romance novels – they were college English textbooks. They were making and comparing notes in the margins. *Are they English professors? But, why are they on this bus? For writing material?*

The Hispanic dude took a seat next to a white, blonde-haired, 19-to-21-year-old female, who was just in front of me. I saw him ask her if the seat was taken (even though there were still vacant double seats) through the crack between the tall seat backs. *Damn, this guy is really on the poon [*sic*] prowl. It's like he just got out of prison.*

The two in front of me then began chatting away. He quickly gained her confidence. He told her that he had just been released from the Tehama County Jail and that he was

going to get even with the guy who put him in there. *Well, my hunch was correct. Jeez, I hope that he doesn't have a loaded gun on him.*

Now, was the lass in front of me freaked out? No, quite the opposite. She was mucho [Spanish for much] impressed with the newly released one. In fact, I think she was in love with him by Redding. *What a rough-hewn smooth operator he is. And, what an impressionable airhead she is.*

Through the northern California night we went. When I saw the sign for the town of Weed, I wondered how much weed was on the bus. I had an internal chuckle and, for some unknown reason, thought of Euler's famous identity equation:  $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$ . *How in the world did Leonhard come up with this mindboggling yet concisely elegant equation of irrationals and binary constants? What triggered his early 18<sup>th</sup> century synapses to arrive at this? What an astounding mind had he.*

After the little township of Hilt, we crossed the border into Oregon. I think it was around one AM, or maybe it was closer to two. Just about all of the passengers on the bus were asleep now. Even the young newly-lovers in front of me were peacefully snoring away.

I felt a little drowsy myself and soon started to nod off. However, I never went into REM sleep. I awoke as we pulled into Medford, Oregon.

I think three passengers got off and one, older, white-haired Caucasian American man wearing a SF Giants cap got on and took a seat in the front section. *Is that old man Malloy?*

*Is he dogging my lost shadow? Or, shadowing my lost dog?  
Maybe someday I should write down these frivolous,  
pettifogging thoughts. Pettifogging ... what a petty situation  
... when in the fog, trying to note trifling details. Yeah ... isn't  
it a petty? [sic] Now, isn't it a shame? [in George Harrison's  
singing voice]*

Then a pair of 30-something, über-tanned hippies got on at Grants Pass, toting quite an array of baggage. They bumped into a few passengers as they wobbled down the aisle. Some frowned upon awaking. *Looks like they're bringing the whole encampment with them.*

At Roseburg a lone gentleman got on the bus. He kind of looked like the infamous D. B. Cooper. *No, that can't be him. Or, can it?*

At Eugene the two English professors got off the bus. I watched the erudite ladies vanish around a brick corner. *Well, I'll probably never see them again. I wonder what becomes of them. Will either of them write a famous novel? But, how would I even know if one of them did? I don't know their names. Will they be mentioned in someone else's writing? Such a strange life this is.*

At the Corvallis stop, the two, just-awake-in-time, young lovers got off and disappeared into the dawn. I think it was around 7:30 AM. *Is she an Oregon State student? Her parents are going to love him.*

When the bus rolled into Salem, to be quite honest, all I could think of is that this was the home of Tawni Cable, Playmate of the Month for the June '89 issue of Playboy

magazine. How would I know this? No, I wasn't a Playboy subscriber or newsstand purchaser. However, I did find said issue in the basement laundry room of my Hyde Street apartment building. There were worse things to look at.

Then an almost-lost neural connection was made and I remembered twirling the two interlocking white gears on a small, red, rectangular, thin, plastic box. It was that old US state capitals toy. (Anyone remember them from the '70s?) You could turn either wheel and a capital would appear in the left window with its corresponding state in the right window. [Salem] [Oregon] I could still see it like it was yesterday. *Where is that geo-toy now?*

As we headed back for I-5, I spotted the Art Deco Salem capitol building in the rising sun. *Who is that golden man on top? [an unnamed Oregon pioneer] What a gaze. Careful with that axe in Eugene, Eugene.*

The bus made a brief stop in Woodburn. The older SF-capped gentleman stepped off the bus. The driver wished him well. Then the older man replied, "Yep, yep, yep ..." as he hobbled away. *Damn, that really is Malloy! [Malloy is featured in the novella 'Mysterieu of San Francisco' and in the short stories 'A Search for Sidle on N' and 'Vermont Street'] What is he doing in Woodburn, Oregon of all places? Well, must remember to ask him when/if I see him again in San Francisco.*

Finally, at 9:47 AM, we were in Portland. Filtered sunlight trickled down to the partially leaf-covered, cracked sidewalk. There was some lingering patchy fog. I would guess that the

temperature was about 55° F on this splendid Thursday fall morning.

I quickly found a bus stop and caught a city bus to the North Portland sector of town. I wanted to find a motel in this area, as I planned to do some hiking and mushroom foraging in Forest Park the next day.

I checked in at the St. John Motor Lodge on Willamette Boulevard around 11:11 AM. (Yes, I remember looking down at my digital wristwatch.) They already had a room ready. The place was nothing to write home about, but it was clean and only two blocks from the St. Johns Bridge, which was how I planned to enter Forest Park tomorrow. I would be crossing the Gothic green bridge on foot.

As soon as I flopped down on the double bed, I was lights-out. I had only slept a total of two hours, at most, on the bus. I was one bleary-eyed, mileage-weary traveler.

I quickly drifted into a dream state. In the dream I walked to an overlook of the Willamette River. I saw the St. Johns Bridge from the western shore. There were two round discs in the suspension bridge towers' openings that looked like occult octopus eyes. Some irregular-shaped, red object was floating below in the river at a position that made it look like a mouth of a face. Well, to give you a better mental image, here's an approximation of what I was seeing:



It was freaky and very menacing. I woke up when it appeared that the bridge-face was starting to approach me. *Must remember not to combine those granules with sleep deprivation. The dreams are just too scary-crazy.*

However, I was still dead-tired, and quickly fell back asleep. No more nightmarish scenes this time. Just good, deep, wholesome sleep.

When I awoke it was 6:06 PM. *Wow, I slept the whole day.*

I was now hungry. I decided to just go for a walk until I found an enticing restaurant. It didn't take but a few blocks.

On a less curvy and less steep Lombard Street, I spied a Thai restaurant in the faltering evening light. *Perfect. This should do the trick.*

The seafood platter called *The St. John Special* was delicious and plentiful. Thirty-five minutes later I was completely satiated. The Asian waitress saw my empty plate.

“Did you enjoy it, sir?”

“Yes, very much. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Glad you liked it. I had a feeling that you would pick that dish. It had its eyes on you.” *What did she just say? So odd, especially after that weird dream. Maybe her English isn’t so good. Yeah, maybe just a fumbling of pronouns.*

It was now 7:07. (Yes, I know, yet another time that you only see in a psecret psociety yarn, and psecret psociety was still some eighteen years upstream from this point in time.) I saw a micro-brew pub out the window. I felt a wee thirsty for a beer, so I decided to check it out.

NoPo (slang for North Portland) Biergarten had about thirty people scattered at outdoor tables, inside booths and sunken-floor tables. I took a seat inside at the oak bar and ordered an extra-dark porter.

The tall, concave-patterned, glass stein was set down on a round cardboard coaster with alternating white-and-black concentric circles. I lifted the beer up to my mouth and examined the coaster more closely. *Wow, that looks just like the ‘bridge eyes’ in my weird dream. But, I’ve never been in this bar before. I’ve never seen these coasters anywhere before. Or, have I?*

After nursing the extra-foamy, hoppy brew for about seventeen minutes, the bartender, who was a white dude about my age with black hair and a silver mushroom necklace, began a conversation with me. I was still the only



one at the bar (for some odd reason – maybe it was my lack of a shower).

“New to town?” he asked.

“Yeah, just visiting for a couple of days,” I replied.

“Visiting some friends?” He sure is curious to know.

“Uh, no, just checking out Portland for the first time. I think I’ll go for a hike in Forest Park tomorrow.”

“Sage idea, man. The liberty caps (*Psilocybe semilanceata*, a psychoactive mushroom) should be out. It rained pretty good the last few nights. Just look on the north-facing grassy glades.” *Wow! That sure was nice of him. But, why would he share such info with a complete stranger. Oh yeah, I have a mushroom T-shirt on. Wake up, sport!*

I thanked him, took my last gulp of beer and left.

As I started my walk back to the motel on Alta Avenue, an idea flew into my perforated cranium: Check out St. Johns Bridge now – at night.

I made a left on Syracuse Street, walked a block, and made a right on Philadelphia Avenue. I began walking up the sidewalk of the bridge’s eastern incline. I only went as far as Edison Street. There, I stopped and marveled at the dark green metal towers with red lights twinkling atop the skinny dark spires.

No circular eyes could be seen in the upper part of the road deck openings. Though, it still felt ominous, even downright

foreboding. *I wonder how Euler's equation fits into this scene. What a silly thought.*

After a few minutes of gazing and wondering, I marched back to my motel room. *Tomorrow should be epic.*

I watched the local news at 10:00. As the weather segment started, I began to feel drowsy. The last words I heard before falling asleep were: "High tomorrow: 71. Low morning clouds will give way to high cirrus clouds by noon. Skies will thicken up again in the evening. No rain expected until after seven o'clock. So, get out and enjoy the day, everyone." *So, enjoy the day. So, enjoy everyone. So, enjoy. So ... <zzzzz>*

I awoke at 7:34 AM, as visually announced by the red LED digits on the cheap clock radio. Curiously, I couldn't recall having any dreams. It was a good night of unbroken sleep.

While taking a shower, I wondered how the day would go. *Will I find any liberty caps? And, if I find some, what will happen if I eat too many? Will I become another wandering Portland space capsule?*

Then I looked down at the shower stall's silver drain. It had a concentric circle design. *I think I'm just noticing concentric circles because of that eerie dream. Shouldn't place so much importance on it. Just let it flow. Away.*

The motel had a free continental breakfast in the office lobby. I tossed a couple of bananas and plastic bottles of water and pineapple juice in my backpack as I ate some toast with blueberry jelly. With a paper coffee cup in hand, I commenced my two-legged journey to Forest Park. *What*

*wiggedness [sic] awaits on the other shore? Eyes suppose that we shall soon find out.*

The 54° F misty air felt great. I was psyched. Whatever was found or lost – including my mind – this was going to be a memorable hike. I could feel my neural circuits beginning to hum as I passed under the eastern, still eyeless, tower.

The Willamette River way below was a placid, basil-green picture of what I always imagined a major river in the verdant Pacific Northwest would look like. Green on – and in – green. Voluminous viridescence.

Then a red tugboat caught my eye as it slowly headed for some docks downstream. *Quite the complimentary contrast to all of these shades of green.*

I was soon passing through the western tower's sidewalk opening. Then I noticed that I was now back over land. *Time to break on through to the forest side.*

At the T-intersection with NW Bridge Avenue, I made a left. In 222 feet (I know, that exact number seems slyly suspicious), I was at a fernicious [sic] trailhead. The Ridge Trail would be my entrance into a nebulous netherworld.

I was only on the Ridge Trail for about a thousand feet (maybe exactly 1001?) before I noticed a lightly worn, narrow deer path on my left, leading down a mossy gulch. It looked a little slippery, yet so very inviting. *Oh, let's take this semi-secret exit, regardless of personal safety risks. Irregardlessly is a real adverb, but why should anyone proceed like that? Well, here we go.*

For the first three hundred or so feet, I was able to walk the faint, slowly descending, completely canopied trail in a normal fashion; i.e., facing forward. But then the little trail went from a gentle wash to a rivulet. *Hello.*

I then had to face the wet, steep path and lower myself, root by root, foot by foot, hand by hand. This went on for about forty feet. Then it kind of plateaued out.

The rivulet was now a small creek with the deer path beside it (no longer in it). I followed the small stream for a couple of hundred feet down to a larger creek, which was about four feet across and a foot deep in the middle. There were plenty of moss-covered boulders in this creek.

I spied an easy route and carefully crossed the babbling brook without a wet misstep. Once on the other side, I took out my trusty \$2.99 compass. The creek seemed to be flowing ENE. I decided to hike downstream on a bankside bear path (perhaps the deer used it, too).

Just 80 yards later, I was in business. A little, grassy, north-facing glade was on my right. *Time to peruse the purlieu.*

I began to part the dewy, foot-high, emerald grass blades with my right hiking boot. Nothing of note was discovered for the first few minutes, save a colorful centipede. But then my fortunes changed with the passing of a turtle. There they were, a pair of liberty caps hiding quietly. *Ah, we've struck neural gold!*

I carefully unearthed them and gave them a pinch. Sure enough, the stalks turned blue within six minutes. *Psilocybin-containing? Check.*

I pulled the riper banana out of my backpack and ate it with the two liberty caps. The blended taste was, well, not that unpleasant. I've sure tasted worse.

I gulped down the pineapple juice and decided to turn around and follow the creek upstream. I felt deft, even if still daft. Hiking was an exhilarating breeze.

When the creek shrank to two feet in width, the bear trail merged into the boulder-filled stream. I carefully began to rock-hop upstream (just like in the novella *To Morrow Tomorrow*). The slope slowly increased, but never got so steep as to require walking on all fours.

After a hundred and fifty feet, the water was no longer visibly flowing. There were just pools of water here and there next to the jade-colored, mossy rocks.

I began stomping through the soft black muck, scaling the wash. This went on for thirteen prime minutes. My heart was really circulating the blood around now. *This is a bit of a cardio workout, which is good. Good psilo-circulation. [sic] Primo cerebral infiltration.*

When I had walked about two football fields, the wash line ended at an abandoned road – now just a nice hiking trail: NW Leif Erikson Drive.

I took a water break for about ten minutes. I still felt ok. My mind was still on Earth, and so were my feet. I was upright and alright. And, strangely, I still hadn't encountered any hikers. So far it had been just a nice solitary morning hike in the Portland Verdancy. [sic]

After hiking in a generally northwest direction for 606 feet (I went back and measured; no, just guesstimating), I came upon a 40-something, white couple at the T-intersection with the Ridge Trail. *Speak normally. Terse answers to any questions. Don't elaborate. Don't go off on a tangent.*

They seemed deep in thought, almost like they were meditating. I decided to ask them a few path-specific questions, before they asked me. I suddenly felt like I wasn't too zapped to converse, and I didn't want to end up in someone's backyard with vicious dogs barking and a shotgun in my face. Yeah, maybe I was already zooming. My rocket ship had most likely cleared the tower somewhere back there.

"Hello," I chirped (perhaps like a redheaded woodpecker). "Would you know where this trail goes?" I asked, thinking my voice sounded strange, almost like from another person.

The wide-brim-hatted man pointed in the direction I was headed. "This way meanders with the contours and goes all the way to Germantown Road."

"Thanks," I said, having no idea where Germantown Road was in relation to St. Johns Bridge.

The bespectacled lady picked up on my geographical uncertainty. "Do you want to go to Germantown Road?"

"I don't know; well, perhaps so. Does it go to Berlin? You know, I'm no Hamburger." *I sure hope they find that funny.*

No laughing. No response. Just an awkward silence for three seconds. The couple then looked down and shook their heads as they walked away. *Was my little joke really that bad? I would have laughed if the roles were reversed. Oh, well. Let's march on and keep our mouth shut.*

I began hiking again on leafy Leif Erikson Drive, trying to forget the odd encounter, but kept thinking: *I bet they knew I was high. Maybe they're reformed hippies. No one holds more scorn for the psyche-inebriated than the reformed ones. Oh, well. Can't win over them all.*

A bird of unknown species then screeched. *Ah, I think he or she agrees with my line thinking. Or, maybe not.*

Soon I was crossing over a small creek. One hundred and eighty feet later I was at a junction with the Hardesty Trail. I curved to the right to stay on Leif Erikson. *What if that couple report me to the park ranger? Will his or her staff be out to apprehend me? Oh, let's not get paranoid. Not now. Not yet.*

I looked up at the oh-so-many-shades-of-green tree canopy as I walked. *This really is awesome. What a place and time to be alive, and to be thinking of being alive at such a place and time. Oh, what nonsense am I thinking now?*

That's when the trail started to feel like a conveyor belt. I was still walking, but it felt like I was being brought forward, like on one of those moving walkways at the airport.

Before I knew it, I was at another trail junction. To my right was NW Old Springville Road, another abandoned motor vehicle road that was now a hiking-only trail. I decided to take it, as it seemed to trend eastward, back towards the Gothic green bridge.

Then, to my surreal surprise, a house appeared to the right of the gravel trail. The hiking trail had become a neighborhood street! In fact, I was now in a small residential area (Whitwood Court). I had only been in the woods for 99 minutes, yet my mind was now soaring at 99 light-years per second.

The houses that I walked past looked like they were made of gingerbread with frosting for the trim. I expected to see Hansel and Gretel, or an evil witch, at any moment. But, I saw no one. It was eerily uninhabited. *Has this area been abandoned?*

Then the gravel turned to asphalt. At the first house on the left I finally saw a human: a Native American young lady in blue jeans with dark hair. She was walking up the street as I was walking down.

The distance between us quickly reduced. As we approached each other, I cheerfully said, "Hi."

She quickly replied, "Oh, hell yes!" She then started laughing, almost uncontrollably. *What in the world?!*



We passed each other. I turned my head to look back at her, and she turned hers around, too. She had this crazy-as-all-of-life-on-Earth smile on her face. I just kept walking. *And, they thought I was the high-as-an-untethered-kite one? What in nature's pharmacy is she on? Or, has she been inhaling the nitroxide? [sic] [nitrous oxide]*

Part of me absolutely wanted to follow her and continue the conversation. No, not out of primal lust, but out of an extreme curiosity. *Who is she? What is her story? Could our stories be interwoven? Would it make for a novel someday? Ah, the endless mysteries of this existence.*

Well, my saner, though much less adventurous self won out (to the detriment of this short story, it would seem; but wait – there's more). I kept marching down the street, feeling very amused – exceptionally euphoric.

Then I was at another T-intersection. NW Old Springville Road ended at US 30 Bypass. I remembered – amazingly – that this was the highway that the St. Johns Bridge carried over the Willamette River.

I crossed the road without getting hit by a car, and began to walk southward on the sidewalk. My shoes felt a bit marshmallowy. [sic]

In know-time, [sic] I was at the same T-intersection I was at 2:22 ago. Yes, I was back at the bridge's western approach. *Excellent. I didn't get lost or injured.*

I curved left on the sidewalk, and began to walk across the 1931 masterwork. I looked up at the towers. *Good: no eyes!*

An overcast sky punctuated with low-flying clouds had moved in. It looked, indeed, like it would be raining at nightfall. *Still have plenty of time. Might as well take my time going back to the motel. There's no rush. Let's just peak, and take a peek, at the peak [middle] of this splendid bridge.*

I slow-walked it to the western tower. I touched the green-painted steel portal. It felt like low-voltage electricity was running through the girders. *Is there some kind of ground fault? Probably just me: I'm the ground fault.*

When I was at the halfway mark, I spotted that same red tugboat again. The river seemed to be grabbing at it. It was bobbing in the water. I focused in on the vessel. It was actually sinking. *Oh, my dearest demigod of on-time delivery! That tugboat is a goner. I hope the crew has already abandoned ship. I think they have. I don't see anyone.*

I then watched the tugboat sink below the surface over the next nineteen minutes. It was an astonishing sight.

Later, back at the motel, I would learn via the 5:00 local news that the tugboat had struck some submerged, just-below-the-surface, metal pilings near the eastern tower's protective barrier wall. *That dream really was a harbinger. Should I tell anyone?*

#### 44. **Kron by Night** [a novelette] (October 2015)

[[]] Convention for the thoughts of the characters in this particular story:

*My [Tryke's] thoughts look like this. / Burke's thoughts look like this. / Mary's thoughts look like this. / Franks' thoughts look like this.*



In memory of Mr. Frank von Peck

It was back in mid-June of 1984 when Burke Braun (future Agent 2), his then-fiancée (and now wife) Mary (undisclosed agent no.), Frank von Peck (future Agent 107) and yours sure-really (future Agent 33) decided to head up to Morrow Mountain State Park (near Albemarle, NC) for a mind-expanding camping trip. Burke had just procured some high-grade, water-soluble, psychoactive *beads* from a fellow employee (now deceased) at Grapevine Records (now defunct) on East Independence Boulevard (now Expressway).

Mary's still-reliable, olive green, trunky 1972 Plymouth Valiant 4-door sedan would be the mode of transit for the

four of us twenty-something and nearly-twenty Caucasian cosmic cadets on a muggy Saturday mid-morning. After Frank's courtesy oil dipstick check, we were off.

It quickly got smoky inside the cab. Mary, a winsome brunette, cracked her window to exhaust the herbal exhalations. *This car is a moving smokehouse.*

The ride was largely uneventful, except for the conversation regarding content and dosage.

"What exactly is it that we are going to take, Burke?" Frank asked from the backseat, next to me.

"Mark, the guy in the EP (Extended Play) section of the store told me that the active ingredient is a psilocybin spinoff," Burke replied from the shotgun seat. *A psilocybin spinoff? / What in this wacky world? / A toxic spinoff?*

"Is it safe?" I asked. "It's not some strychnine amalgam, is it?" *Gosh, he is already paranoid.*

"Yeah, it's safe; it's not rat poison. Several of the Grapevine crew have already done it. All glowing, super-positive reviews." *Nice to hear.*

"What's the recommended dosage?" Mary asked as she briefly glanced over at Burke, while keeping two hands on the steering wheel. *Good question. A very good question.*

Burke turned his brown-haired head to the left. "Mark said that 'one is fun'; 'two will do'; 'three will set you free'; but,

'four will slam the door'." *What door? / Wow, Mark managed to make a rhyme out of it.*

"In that case, I'll be taking five," Frank immediately blurted. *Good lord.*

"Are you crazy, Frank?" I asked rhetorically. "You don't want to flip out and fall off the mountain."

"I'll be fine, dude," Frank said assuredly. "That old mountain is just a tired, burnt-out, sloughing-away hill."

Burke looked back at me. "Let me guess, Tryke, [my nickname, which became my nom de brosse] you're only going to take half of one."

"No, Burke, I was thinking of four and a quarter." *He's already gone. / Why so precise?*

"Four and a quarter!" Mary exclaimed. "I hope that someone has a razor blade and a magnifying glass." *I don't.*

"What's with 4.25, Tryke?" Burke asked.

"I happened to notice that there were 17 of those orange micro-orbs in the Ziploc bag, Burke," I replied. "Seventeen divided by four is ..." *I'm already too high for math.*

"My sweet Mary will be zonked out of her gourd if she takes that many," Burke said. *Probably so.*

"Maybe we should divide them up proportionately by relative body weight," Mary suggested. *Great idea.*

“If Frank wants to take five, he can go for it,” Burke said. “I’ll only be doing four. Four should be more than plenty.”

“Ok, if Frank is going ultra-cosmonaut and taking five, and Burke is taking four, then I’ll take four, too,” I said. “And, if my math is correct, this leaves four for Mary as well.” *Did he add that up right?*

“No way is little old me taking four,” Mary announced. “That would be like you and Burke taking seven.” *She’s right.*

“I’ve got it solved,” Frank said, projecting his voice mainly to Mary, who was directly in front of him. “Mary will take three. Burke and Tryke will take four each. And me, your fearless Frank, will take six.” *Famous last words. / What an epitaph that would be: ‘He took six’ ... a guaranteed graveyard head-turner, for sure.*

“I don’t think I even want to do three,” Mary said.

“Ok, how about 2.5 for Mary, four for Burke, five for me, and 5.5 for Frank?” I suggested. *What’s with Tryke saying point-five instead of half? / He’s stoned out of his mind.*

Burke smelled a rat. “No, you’ll get way to flaky on five, Tryke. I don’t want to have to babysit both you and Frank while I’m off the rails myself, treading water in that green pond. [This green pond is featured in the novella *To Morrow Tomorrow*.] No way, José.” *Wish I had a tape recorder for that one. / Burke is quite baked from my Frankenblend. [weed] / My guy is high.*

As side one of Burke's custom-edited art-rock cassette tape came to a close with the fade-out of the Genesis *Los Endos* song, I spied the Albemarle City Limit sign on NC 24/27. *Wow, those 45 minutes sure flew by.*

Burke flipped the tape over and the Pink Floyd *Summer '68* song started. *How do you feel? How do you feel? Most excellent, thank you very much!*

Then we began to climb the Morrow Mountain entrance road. Soon, we passed the welcome sign. And then, the 'Alcoholic Beverages Prohibited' sign appeared. *Won't have to worry about violating that one this time. / No beer in here.*

When we arrived at the triangle intersection, Mary slowed the car to a near-stop. "Which way, guys?" Mary asked.

"Uh, let's score a decent campsite before we start roaming around," Burke answered. *Good idea.*

Mary turned to the left and we made our way down to the campground area. The gray tree boughs and green leaves whizzed by. *Wonder where this day goes. / Wonder what adventures lie ahead. / I hope I have enough smoke. Yeah, I am sure I do. / I hope the boys don't get totally incoherent.*

A couple of minutes later, and we were in the campground area. It was only about 40% full. We claimed a distant site on the loop furthest from the main road. *Hope no one sets up shop right next to us.*

We set the tents up, after some proper-assembly confusion, and began to eat lunch on a wooden picnic table. It was a sunny, warm-bordering-on-hot, very high noon.

I then asked the question that I thought was on everyone's meandering mind: "When should we eat those little orange orbettes?" [*sic*]

"I think now is too soon, Tryke," Burke said. "I want to be peaking when I see the sunset from the top of the mountain." *Me, too. / That sure would be nice. / I'm ready to drop them down the hatch right now.*

"What's the duration of the trip?" Mary asked. *A most excellent question.*

"Mark said that it lasts about six to seven hours," Burke said. *Good, it's not 14 hours like A. [A = acid, slang for LSD] / Perfect. / Nice.*

"How about a staggered start?" Frank proposed. "That way we can gauge the potency and not end up in the wrong place at the wrong time." *Interesting idea. / Yeah, that would certainly suck.*

"That's a great idea, Frank," Mary said.

"Sounds smart to me, too, Frank," I added. "But, did you mean an incremental start? A staggered start would have each of us ingesting those little orange beads at different times, which would be a very interesting way to do them, no less."



“Ok, Mister Technical, you got me. I meant an incremental start.” *Am I really sounding too technical? Maybe squelch it.*

“But, we may never get the full effect by taking it incrementally,” Burke contested. *That could be true, too.*

“Sorry, my love; it’s three votes to one for a test run first,” Mary said as she gave Burke a funny grin.

“Ok, ok, I’ll do it your way,” Burke relented. “But, I better get some high voltage in my bean, or you’ll be buying the next round of 17.” *Burke wants to go over the galactic cliff.*

Frank and I just smiled. Mary playfully stuck her tongue out at Burke. And Burke, well, he seemed suddenly lost in thought as a lone sparrow darted by. *Burke’s ozoned [sic] by the weed. / Burke is cooked. / What is my beau thinking of now?*

In surreptitious short order, we each dropped one orange micro-ball into our paper cups of pulpy orange juice. We looked at each other. *The moment of truth has arrived.*

Frank broke the anxious silence: “Here’s to an epik [sic] with a hard k voyage.” *Epik kaos. [sic]*

We raised our cups and tapped them together. Then we commenced the psychedelic-solution ingestion. With the last gulp, I looked down at my Casio digital wristwatch. It was 12:21 PM. *A curiously palindromic start time. I wonder when we leave the launch pad. / Tryke, already watching the clock.*

“Ok, group, where should we go first?” Frank asked.

“Do we already have to go somewhere?” Mary questioned.  
*Oh man, I don't want to stay here all day.*

“Hey, if Frank feels the need to move about, why not just let him drive your car, Mary?” Burke suggested.

“Ok, that's fine by me,” Mary said. “But, stay in the park, Frank.” *Absolutely. / Please stay inbounds, Peck. / Why, certainly. Do they really think I would drive out of here?*

And with that tempered approval, Frank got the car keys from Mary and we re-occupied the venerable Valiant. I grabbed shotgun; Burke and Mary sat in the backseat.

“Did everyone bring their valuables?” I asked. “No one left anything important in the tents or on the picnic table, did they?”

“All good back here,” Mary and Burke said in uncanny unison.

“Got my stuff,” Frank said as he eased the steering-column shifter into D. *Gosh, I hope this goes off without a legal hitch.*

Frank slowly drove us out of the campground area, going extra-slow to keep the gravel dust down. A few campers waved to us and we waved back. *Maybe they appreciate Frank's considerate, slow speed. / If they only knew ...*

He turned right onto the main asphalt-covered road and we began to descend towards Lake Tillery. We all rolled down our windows. The late spring air was infused with a multitude

of fragrances. *Am I already having olfactory hallucinations? The scents in the air are divine.*

In no time we were down at the lakefront. Frank parked Mary's sedan near the unoccupied boat ramp. We walked over to the wooden dock.

"Well, we're about fifteen minutes out, group," I stated. "How are we flinging, I mean feeling?" *Group? / Flinging? / Tryke's already getting goony.*

"I'm flinging just fine," Mary said. *Whoops! Misspoke there.*

"I think I am getting an initial start-up charge," Frank announced. *I'm sure he is. / I hope Frank doesn't end up in a dangerous place again.*

"Nothing for me, yet," Burke said. "I hope this isn't like the last *great* mushroom excursion. What a fizzle that was. I sure hope these little beads aren't stale." *Or oxidized?*

I looked down at my watch. "Folks, my mind's elevation is twelve hundred thirty-seven feet above ennui level." *Ennui level? / Gosh, I hope he doesn't spout off French words all day. / He's already wiggling.*

Frank quickly picked up on my time-as-mental-elevation game. "Well, in twenty-three minutes, your lofty thoughts are going to crash down eleven hundred sixty feet. That's one tall, steep-ass cliff, leading to complete despair, my friend. That will probably be all she wrote for you, Tryke." *What a rosy prognosis. / 1260 – 1160 = 100.*

“That good, huh?” I retorted.

“Let’s not make this a by-the-numbers trip,” Burke said.

I then took my watch off and put it in my left front pants pocket. *Burke’s right. I don’t want that damn watch to meter this trip. Let’s forget about the exact time ... for a long time.*

Then we all sat down on the dock and looked at the slightly undulating surface of the lake. We were quiet; the conversation ceased. *Getting lost.*

It appeared that the different shades of bluish green on the lake’s surface were being raised to different levels. The effect was like looking at a 3-D image without the glasses. *I wonder if anyone else is seeing this. / I wonder if Burke is feeling what I’m feeling. / Woah, I feel it now. Oh, boy. Here we go. / Whose keys are these? Oh yeah, they’re Mary’s. Must not lose them.*

After a speechless twelve minutes, Frank stood up. “Ready to go to the top?” *I hope that he can still drive satisfactorily. / Where?*

“Sure!” Burke exclaimed with verve.

“Think you can still drive ok, Frank?” Mary asked.

“Better than ever,” Frank said über-confidently. *Oh, no.*

We got back in the now-glowing green Valiant. Frank started the car up and began the climb out of the valley without a hint of trouble. He went straight at the triangle intersection

and began to ascend Morrow Mountain, an extremely old, rounded, heavily wooded Uwharrie peak.

Frank's driving skills were still excellent as he expertly navigated the stone-wall-lined hairpin turn. He had the window down with his left arm on the door. With his dark shades on, he looked like a younger Bryan Ferry. (See the *In Your Mind* album cover.)

A minute later, Frank was parking the car near the circle at the top. We all got out and walked over to the overlook.

"Man, it looks just like a book cover, [This scene is the cover of the *To Morrow Tomorrow* novella.] a most magical book cover," Frank said.

We stopped for a moment to take in the splendid view of the green forest blanket with other well-worn Uwharrie peaks here and there, and Lake Tillery way down below. It was probably in the low 80s (F) now. The sun was bright. White cumulus clouds seemed to be puffing out and expanding every nanosecond. *This day sure feels incredibly alive.*

After a five-minute group silence, I spoke up. "It sure is something else." *He's ripped.*

"It certainly is," Mary added. *She's ripped, too.*

"Unless it's just something," Burke contended. *Burke's shredded.*

"Or else," Frank looped on. *Or else, what? / How is that?*

“Are we nowhere or elsewhere?” Mary asked. *Knowhere?*  
*[sic]*

“Maybe it’s a meaningless distinction,” I said. “You know, the treachery of words and all that jazz.” *What did he just say? / Here comes the nonsense. / His cake is baked.*

Frank then began walking on the slate-and-mortar wall. We followed him. He stopped about a hundred feet down (in the main parking lot area) and jumped down on the outside of the three-foot-high stone barrier.

He seemed to be looking for something for a few seconds. (What he was looking for is mentioned in the *To Morrow Tomorrow* novella.) Then he shot up on the wall again. Eventually, we all sat down on the masonry wall.

“Burke, where are those orange dots?” Frank asked. “I think I’m going to go for it and take another four.” *Oh, dear. / Four more?! / So, Frank really wants to get some mileage. I’ll match him.*

“They’re right here in my pocket,” Burke said as he looked around to see if the coast was clear for extraction. “Four seems like a man overboard, Frank.” *He’ll be overboard alright, after creating a foundering of our ship. / Maybe I can talk him down. / Why does he want to do so much?*

I now felt it was my time to claim a cut. “I guess I could go for just one more. I’m pretty high already. This stuff is clean. Elle Sioux Prima.” *El suprema? / I hope that we don’t encounter the park ranger. His mouth will get us all hung.*

“I could maybe do two more,” Burke said. *Two more?! What is my fiancé thinking? / Burke and Frank may end up over the dam at this rate.*

Mary then looked at the two psychic daredevils. “Guys, just do another one. I’m already soaring. Just a single one each. Then see where you are an hour from now. Doing two or more seems like an invitation to a grave mishap.” *Superb advice. / Yep, she’s right. / Ok, I will go all night, taking one every five hours.*

Burke got the plastic bag out and carefully unzipped it. He, Frank and I each swallowed one more orange orbette. *Buckle up, spaceman. It could get bumpy. / Booster rocket, commence firing. / I’m ready to really zoom. Want to exit the stratosphere. / Hope the boys will be ok.*

“Hey, let’s check out the old picnic shelter up on the knob before we leave,” Frank suggested. *Up on the knob?*

I looked up towards the shelter. It looked vacant. “Sure, good idea, Frank. Let’s do it.”

“Yeah, let’s check it out.” Mary said in continued agreement.

“Let’s get some drinks out of the car before we go up there,” Burke advised.

With non-alcoholic drinks in hand, we marched up to the slate-and-mortar shelter. One hundred twenty yards later and we were there. It was still unoccupied. *Great. No one is here. / How long before a family of eight invade?*

There were four large picnic tables under the shake roof. Burke and Mary sat on one and I sat on an adjacent one near the shelter's wide, rear, expansive-view opening.

Frank hoisted his left leg up on the slate-and-mortar wall. We were all looking out towards Lake Tillery and the other Uwharrie Mountain Range mounds to the northeast, two to five miles away.

With the shade and the mountaintop breeze from an approaching cold front, the setting was not that uncomfortable. After a few slugs of our drinks, we all grew quiet. *What does it mean to have such abstract, seeming inconsequential, random thoughts? And, what does it mean to question them? / Sure is a wonderful day. / Patterns are everywhere, in everything. / Fifteen months ago ...*

Frank suddenly blurted out a shocking revelation (to him): "Damn, man, your hair has the weirdest shades of red in it, Tryke. It looks like it's on fire. I see individual flames." *Well, he sure doesn't need anymore. / I see it, too. / Glad that I didn't do another one.*

"Yeah, yeah, yeah; I've heard that before," I replied.

Then, ten or more minutes would often go by without anyone saying anything. Yes, we were mega-mind-zapped. The orange dots were not placebo-ineffectivo. [*sic*]

Over the course of the next two-plus hours, someone would say something like 'Wait, did you say something?' Then someone would reply, typically several minutes later, with a line like 'No, I don't think so.' And, sure enough, this would



be followed after a significant delay with a line like ‘No shortage of thoughts today.’ And, yes, this in turn would be sent onto a Moebius strip with a line very similar to (if not exactly) ‘Wait, what did you say?’ Moreover, our minds were flying way too fast for a real-time oral description.

There were a few visits from other park guests of various temperaments and ages. But, we just held our tables. (Frank had settled on the other side of my picnic table.) Perhaps we were being picnic shelter hogs, but at the time, we were honestly oblivious to it. We were tactically immobilized.

Then Mary noticed some large bees that appeared to be hornets buzzing around. We all started to watch them, noticing that they would return to the fireplace and fly up the flue. They left a nice, easy to follow, trail in the air. *Man, I’m trailing bigtime. / They must have their nest in this fireplace’s chimney. / I’d hate to get stung by a bee right now. That would truly suck. / Probably time to move elsewhere.*

Mary finally spoke up. “Guys, I think it’s time to leave this place to the bees.”

“Agreed,” I said.

Burke and Frank just nodded. *They are chasing after their lost marbles, I can tell.*

We slowly walked back to Mary’s car, which was now pulsating. *Man, I’m glad that I’m not driving. / Hope she’s ok to drive. / Take it slow, Mary ... nice and slow.*

Mary got her keys back from Frank, opened the driver's door, got in, and acted like she was going to drive off without us. We all had a laugh, though I think we all fell for her joke for a second or two. She then unlocked the other three doors. We all retook our Charlotte-takeoff seat assignments.

"Are you ok to drive, honey?" Burke asked Mary.

"Yeah, I feel ok. I'm high, but not nearly as high as you guys. The road still looks like the road." *Whew! It looks like a cooling black lava flow to me. / It has ripples and waves in it.*

"There's something I must confess," Burke said. "Frank and I each took another orange orbette." *Tiny orbettes and extra-large orbits. / Not really surprised. / Burke had to confess.*

"When?" Mary asked.

"In the walk up to the shelter," Burke said.

"No wonder you two were essentially speechless back there," Mary said.

We all buckled up (somehow still attuned to personal safety). Mary started the car up, cautiously backed up, and then began to slowly descend Morrow Mountain.

Mary's driving seemed to be pretty good. She never came close to crossing the center line or touching the right shoulder. Her speed was below the posted limit the whole way down.

As we cleared the hairpin turn, Burke pressed the cassette back into the tape deck. The song *Awaken* by Yes began

playing. It was a magical descent, like we were in some fantastical movie. The road and trees seemed to be advancing towards the car: an onrush of hyper-pleasant sensory overload.

We breezed through the triangle intersection. There was a ravine to the right that seemed to be out of a fairy tale. I kept expecting a gnome to appear amongst the sylvan serenity. *Such a splendid scene. Such a splendid day.*

I even thought that I could hear the small creek babbling for a moment. However, I then realized that it was just those dissolved dots in my brain. *Man, I am cruising at 37,000 feet. A saturated bean seven miles high at 777 MPH.*

Soon, we were pulling back into the campground. I noticed that it had filled up a bit since we had left. *When did we leave here? What time is it? Should I look at my watch? [I refrained.] Everything appears to be going quite well. I feel fine, at least physically. Blood circulation to my extremities seems ok.*

We disembarked from the most-valuable-at-the-time Valiant. A family of four with a dog had set up camp just one small spot over from us. *It never fails. I knew someone would pop a tent next to us. Why does this happen? Maybe do a study on this someday. / We now have neighbors. Wonderful. Freaking wonderful. / Damn. This could be a major buzzkill. / Hope the boys can keep it reeled in.*

Their tan-and-white dog came over and sniffed us. I petted the collie-mix on the back. He was friendly and just seemed curious. Or, maybe he was looking for an auxiliary food

source for the evening. *Dogs and humans. Such a strong linkage between the species. Amazing how they can sense intentions, emotions ... and thoughts? Does the dog know that we're not in our usual frame of mind? / Maybe the dog smells the cat on me.*

The dog wandered back to his campsite. The owners apologized for any inconvenience. We just waved and smiled (strangely). Frank said, "No problem." *Well, no problem so far.*

We then all sat down in folding lawn chairs and tried to decide what was next on the neural agenda. Without thinking, I took a peak at my watch. It was 4:17 PM. *So, almost four hours since the initial dose. A nice high. Still coherent, I guess. Though, I wouldn't want to be quizzed.*

Frank gulped down some iced tea. He recapped the bottle and said, "Hey, let's check out the Kron House."

"That could be very interesting," Mary replied.

"Yeah, I'm up for that," Burke said. "I feel like we're on display here at this campsite." *Totally.*

"I agree," I said. "This campground setting is inhibiting my whirling and a-twirling buzzeroni." [sic] *A spinning slice of buzzeroni pizza, please. / We better get Tryke out of here before he starts talking to the campers. That would be bad. It wouldn't end good. / Time to vacate the premises.*

After about seven minutes (my best guess), we got back in the green, sponge-like-textured car with our drinks and some

protein bars. Mary navigated the forest-canopy-covered roads perfectly. And in just over five minutes, we were parked far away from the two vehicles in the Kron House parking lot. (The Kron House and environs were also visited and examined in the *To Morrow Tomorrow* novella.) *Wonder how this will go. / What awaits us? / Always a must-stop. / This just might be a whole lot of fun.*

We disembarked and began walking up the timber steps to the restored Kron House, a German doctor's family house from the 1800s, which sat atop a knoll clearing. A joyful, merrily skipping along, Hispanic family of three passed us without incident. *Ok, that accounts for one of the two cars in the parking lot.*

Once at the old house, we walked around it, occasionally peeking through the curtain-less windows. We were lost in our thoughts, everyone imagining living in such a house in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with no electricity or indoor plumbing. *No sensationalized TV News after dinner. Maybe not that bad. / No commercials chopping up the day. / A cold crap in January. / Hot as hell in those upper rooms in the summer.*

I finally spoke up as we made our way over to the doctor's small office building (also restored). "I wonder what went through their minds on long, hot summer nights." *Or, on long, cold winter nights.*

"Probably not what's going through your mind," Frank said. *A nice friendly zinger from Peck.*

"They probably weren't thinking about us being here today," Mary added. *Thinking about them, thinking about us ...*

“Certainly not in this state of mind,” Burke concluded.

“Do you think that the good doctor ever got inebriated on anything?” I asked.

“I think he was a teetotaler,” Mary said.

“Not even a Monday morning moss smoker?” I asked, thinking it would elicit some laughter. However, it went over like a lead-cladded zeppelin. Crickets. *Moss smoker?*

After peering into the windows of Dr. Kron’s office and patient examination room, Frank had an idea for the next move. “Hey, let’s walk down to the little graveyard.”

“Sure, why not?” I replied.

“Yeah, I’m game for that,” Burke said.

“Ok, lead the way, Frank,” Mary said as she motioned towards the trail.

It was an easy four-minute stroll through the woods on a footpath to the Kron family gravesite. Once there, we studied the names and the dates on the headstones. *1798 ... born just 22 years after the start of this American nation. George Washington was still alive then. / Prussia ... that’s not even a country anymore. / Ah, he married a French lady in Paris in 1823, just a couple of years after Napoleon croaked on St. Helena. / Human lives just become names and years on a stone. And, many times not even that.*

Frank rested the palm of his right hand on Dr. Kron’s obelisk. “I can feel the stream of history,” he said.

“Is it hot or cold?” I asked. No one seemed to find it humorous. *Bombed again. Drop attempts at humor.*

“It’s electric, dude,” Frank replied. “Fifty milliamps. I’m feeling the electrons.” *He’s astro-crocked. [sic]*

I touched a cracked, white marble headstone. “I wonder what the stone carver’s life was like.” *Life or wife? / Did anyone carve his or her headstone? Where was he or she buried? And, what were his/her wildest thoughts? Oh, what does it matter now? Why am I thinking such craziness? Those orange orbettes, of course.*

“It sure puts one’s life in perspective,” Mary said.

We then all sat down in various spots around the little graveyard and became enveloped (and developed) by our thoughts. No one said anything for at least fifteen minutes, maybe many more. *I really have no idea what anyone is thinking, including myself. And, that’s funny just to think. Just these incessant meandering fragments. / I bet it was a hard life out here. No interest in going back in time. / Wow, I just know that we are all thinking the exact same thoughts. / I could live out here in that little house after a few minor additions, like an A/C unit.*

Time had become hard to estimate. Relational temporal measurements seemed uncertain. I then glanced at my wristwatch again. It was now 5:25 PM. *Five hours out. Still cruising nicely. No asteroid collisions.*

Finally, Mary recommenced the conversation. “Are you guys ready to go now?” *Good call. Enough channeling of the Krons. / Did Mary just ask a question? To whom?*

“Sure, dear,” Burke replied.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said. “I was getting quite confused by the backwards clocks in that rabbit hole.” *What rabbit hole? / Backwards clocks? / Tryke is toast.*

Burke was then staring at the ground. “It really sucks that some worthless vandals have broken these gravestones and left trash here,” he said. *It certainly does. / Would love to dump this trash on their living room floor or in their car. So tired of being human sometimes. / Walking trash.*

We all then became painfully aware of the sad condition of the gravesite. We began to pick up the beer cans, soda bottles, plastic wrappers, partially decomposed napkins and paper plates, and place them in a discarded plastic grocery bag. *A picnic at this gravesite? Weird focks. [sic] / I bet whoever smashed up these graves is a certified mega-loser. / Pigs that walk on two legs. Wait, that thought is insulting to swine everywhere. Strikethrough. / A world losing respect.*

Frank held the bag open as we quickly filled it. He began looking around for a trashcan.

“Looks like you got left holding the bag, Frank.” No laughter. *Remember, no attempts at humor. Everyone is way too zonked to get any jokes.*



Burke knew what Frank was looking for. “Frank, I remember passing a trashcan at the doctor’s office building.”

“Ok, I’ll take care of the trash,” Frank said as he began to march back up the trail.

We followed behind him in silence. I wonder how many people have walked on this little trail. *435,534 unique visits? Why am I thinking such trivial nonsense? Because it’s what I seem to always do.*

Once clear of the last piece of understory, Frank saw the trashcan and promptly deposited the gravesite trash. *Score. Two points for the unassisted dunk.*

“You get the good-deed-of-the-day gold medal, Frank,” Mary said as we all gathered near the grape arbor.

The sun was very bright and quite warm. However, a dry line had now passed through and the humidity had dropped under 30%, which made it tolerable in the shade. I would venture to guess that is was 84° F with an 8.4 MPH breeze out of the northwest. Just venturing a guess.

“Hey, there are a pair of extra-large, army-green, outdoor-type blankets in the car’s trunk, and even some small throw pillows,” Mary said. “How would you guys like to lie down and relax under one of those tall oak trees over there?” *Oh, yeah. That’s the ticket. / Perfect. / Just hope that no one bothers us. They seem to be growing more sedentary.*

“Sounds like a grand idea, Mary,” I said, already glancing over and sizing up a nice spot.

“I will second that,” Burke added.

“Ok, give me the keys and I’ll run down and get everything,” Frank enthusiastically offered.

“Sure you don’t need any help?” Burke asked.

“No, Frank is the man who can get it all.” *Ah, he’s cementing his claim on the third person singular.*

Mary gave Frank her car keys and he disappeared down the steps to the parking lot. *Hope he doesn’t lock the keys in the trunk. That would suck moose eggs. Mousse eggs? / Hope he does ok down there.*

In just three minutes he was running back up the hill with the blankets and some assorted toss pillows under his arms.

“How was my time?” Frank asked, almost out of breath.

“Most peculiar,” Burke said.

I laughed as I pulled out my watch and spied its face. It read 5:45 PM. *Ah, a quarter to six and all is well.*

“Well, how fast was I, Mr. van Tryke, the man with the stopwatch?” Frank implored. *Stopwatch?*

“Five forty-five,” I dryly announced. “You’re going to have to work on your trunk-searching strategy and step-scaling technique if you want to make the team this year.” *What did Tryke just say? / What team is he talking about? / That time is bullshit!*

“No way!” Frank exclaimed. “I know that I was quicker than five minutes and forty-five seconds.” *Oh, I get it: That’s the time of day. / It’s already 5:45? Wow!*

We all had a bit of a guffaw. Five and a half hours out and we were feeling great. *I want to do another one. / Glad there are no health issues with anyone. / No bad people or animal interactions so far. / I want to do two more, maybe three. Make this a landmark psychedelic experience.*

We set up the king-size blankets next to each other under a giant, century-old oak tree. It provided total shade. And, the ground wasn’t too hard or damp. We soon found comfortable spots and fell back into our thought parades. *This is it – right here. / The boys seem to be doing ok. The colors are amazing. Ultra-iridescent. / A perfect rest stop this certainly is. / This sure beats the campground.*

We were all lying down, heads resting on toss pillows, faces up; all just staring at the boughs, branches, twigs and leaves of the massive old tree, when Frank made his demand for refueling: “Is there any way that I could do two more, Burke? Just two more.”

Burke extracted the clear plastic bag from his front jeans pocket and counted the remaining orange micro-orbs. “Ok, there are exactly eight left,” he announced. “We can do two each to finish it off.”

“I’m game,” I said. “Pass the bag.” *This will be a nocturnal grand finale. I won’t do anything psychoactive for at least a year after this. Well, maybe a month.*

Burke extracted two of the orange orbettes and threw them down his throat. Then he passed the bag to me, and I promptly did likewise. Frank got the bag next and tilted it, watching the four remaining, not-quite-perfectly-round, cantaloupe-colored orbules [*sic*] wobble down the seam.

“Mary, how many do you want to do?” Frank asked.

“One is plenty for me,” she replied. *That crafty fox is going to get to consume a total of six. / Frank sure pulled a smooth one there. / Does that mean that he will do a half-dozen? Wow! I hope he can keep it together.*

And with that, Frank ingested three more apricot orbettes, chasing them down with a couple of slugs of his bottled iced tea. He then handed the Ziploc bag back to me and smiled. We both had similar thoughts. *You sly dog. / I bet Tryke knows that I pulled a keen move there.*

Then I handed the plastic bag back to Burke, and he handed it to Mary on the far end. She then extricated the last peach-hued pinhead from the corner of the clear bag and popped it in her mouth. *All gone. / All gone. / All gone.*

“All gone,” she then calmly stated. *She read my mind. / She read my mind. / She read my mind.*

“Just for reference, what time is it, Tryke?” Frank asked.

I checked my watch. “It’s 6:06,” I announced.

“We’ll be flying high to at least midnight,” Burke said. “Maybe touch back down at one or two in the morning.”

“Is that when you plan on returning to the campsite?” Mary asked.

“What campsite?” I asked, momentarily forgetting about our tents. *Well, he won't be making any sense tonight. / Has he really forgot about the campground? / Looks to be a long night with/for Tryke.*

“Have you really forgotten about our tents?” Mary asked out of complete disbelief.

“Oh yeah,” I sputtered out. “I was just testing you guys.” *Wonder if they believe me. Probably not. / Whatever, Tryke. / Nice try. / Oh, boy! Tryke is burnt toast.*

The conversation ground to a halt as we began to study the intricacies of the amazing oak tree. It looked like a matrix of mosaic leaf-tiles that tilted ever so when the wind blew. The unearthly textures seemed to permeate the air between my eyes and the upper branches of this most awesome tree.

After about twenty-five minutes of under-tree silence, I felt the urge to speak up, as cued by the passing of a raven. *Poe's bird ate the manuscript. What a silly thought.*

“You know, this massive oak tree probably existed back when Dr. and Mrs. Kron were still alive. It was most likely just a seedling in 1876 on the nation's centennial.” *He might be correct. / What is he saying now? / That's just a wild guess. Who knows what the exact age of this tree really is?*

“I sure would like to climb that tree,” Frank disclosed. *Oh, no. Did he really say that?*

“Well, don’t attempt it now,” I said.

“Why not? I feel so spry.” *Spry, my ass. / Is he really going to climb it? / Surely, Frank is just kidding.*

Frank then stood up and announced his climbing plan. “See that magnolia tree next to it? I’ll use it to get perched in the oak tree. Magnolia trees are like ladders: They are very easy to climb.” *What?! / He’s zapped more than I thought. / I can already see him tumbling out of that tree and breaking a leg. This is where it all goes south.*

“Are you sure, Frank?” Mary asked in a dissuading tone.

“Medic may not get here for an hour,” I added, backing up Mary. “We’ll have to drive to the park office and explain your accident while tripping our heads off. Or, you could immediately die from the fall and save us the trouble.” *Tryke has no faith in my climbing abilities. / Gosh, what a horrible scenario. / Oh, please no. Dear God, no.*

“Very funny, Tryke,” Frank said. “I’ll be just fine. Thank you very much.”

“Be careful, man,” Burke cautioned. “Check for dead limbs and don’t go up too high.”

“Oh, I’m already up so very, very high,” Frank replied. *Oh, dear. / Just what we all feared. / Lovely.*

We watched Frank dash over to the magnolia tree that was about ten feet from the base of the big oak tree. He very adroitly scaled the magnolia tree to a height of about twenty-

five feet. Then he grabbed hold of a crossing ten-inch-diameter bough of the oak tree and climbed up on it like a gymnast. *He really does seem pretty deft. / Wow! / I couldn't imagine doing that right now.*

He then shimmied his way to the limb's crotch and rested his back against the huge trunk. Once securely ensconced, he smiled down at us, just like the Cheshire cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. He was in no pain or distress. *Well, look at that. He did it. Just hope that he can get back down safely. / He sure accomplished that in short order. / Only Frank, only Frank.*

"How do you feel?" I shouted up to our agile arborealist. [sic]

"Higher than you," Frank replied, followed by an owl sound that seemed to warble as it came down to my ears. *Was that reverb or preverb? [sic] / I sure hope he doesn't fall. That would suck unimaginably. / I would freak out if I were sitting up there right now.*

"How's the view?" Burke asked.

"Great. Looks like there's a raccoon in the top of the Kron House chimney." *Can he really see that from there? / Frank's hallucination station. / He better get down before he leaps for an imaginary nymph.*

"How long do you plan to stay up there?" Mary asked Frank.

"I'll be down before it gets dark," Frank said. "I'll descend with the setting sun." *That should get a rise out of them. / How poetic. / That long? / That's nuts.*

“Sunset is probably two hours from now,” Mary yelled. “Is your perch really that comfortable?”

“It’s an impekkable [sic] with a double-k perch,” Frank replied.

Suddenly, we heard a vehicle door shut in the parking lot. *Damn! I sure hope that’s not the park ranger or a park employee. / Oh, crap! The park ranger is here to bust us. We should have never parked in that lot. / Well, it was all going too good. Reality has now arrived, unannounced and most unwelcome. / Things may get very interesting now. I hope they don’t see me in this tree. Maybe I should tell them not to look up at me.*

We all remained silent. Then, after a hyper-extended minute, we heard an engine start, followed by the sound of wheels backing over the pebbly asphalt. Next, the sound of that vehicle driving away. *That must have been the other car that was parked in the lot when we arrived. / That must have been the other car that was parked in the lot when we arrived. / That must have been the other car that was parked in the lot when we arrived. / That must have been the other car that was parked in the lot when we arrived.*

“That must have been the other car that was parked in the lot when we arrived,” Frank said from on high.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Mary said.

“Me, too,” Burke said.

“Me, three – I mean four,” I tacked on.



Then we all got quiet again and began wondering about the car's occupant or occupants. *But, where did they come from? / Where were they the past two hours? / Was he/she/they at the green pond, flipping their wig all day? / Was some psychopath spying on us?*

Frank still looked very relaxed in the oak tree. As for me, the pillow and blanket felt more than adequate. I was quite comfortable right where we were, and Burke and Mary seemed content, too. *Equilibrium re-established. Though, I can't totally relax until he gets down out of that monstrous tree.*

A tranquil 27 minutes passed with each of us lost in the morass of our deepening thoughts and surreal visions once again. *The Kron children probably played right where we are lying, maybe 140 or so years ago. / I hope no one else comes up here. I like having this to ourselves. / I sure hope no bear wanders up here. / The three of them look dead down there.*

At a near-dusky 7:27, (Yes, I checked my watch again, and was once again surprised by the palindromic time.) Frank carefully descended from the oak tree to the magnolia tree to terra firma (solid earth). *Thank God he's safely back on the ground. / Yey, he's out of that tree. / Glad that he made it down ok. / Why are they so immobilized?*

Frank walked over and sat down on the far end of the blanket that I was lying on. He didn't seem to be over-exerted by the tree climbing adventure. He actually seemed to be thinking of his next forest foray.

“How was it up there?” I asked Frank. “Did you feel any vertigo?”

“Not at all,” he replied. “Usually I am somewhat uneasy with heights. But today, a piece of cake. I felt very fluid in my hand and foot movements and body positioning. It was like I was in some automatic climbing mode.” *Automatic climbing mode? / Automatically zapped. / Automatically adept.*

Frank then laid his slender torso down. He stared up at the tree with the rest of us. “That sure is one mighty-ass tree,” he said.

“It really is,” Mary replied.

“I’m sure that it has seen a lot of human foolishness over the decades,” I added. *And now some more.*

“The tree has *seen*?” Burke questioned. “And, where exactly would the tree’s eyes be, Tryke?”

“Everywhere, Burke,” I replied. “On each barkette [*sic*] on every limb.” *Barkette? / What did he just say? / I had to ask.*

A few chuckles then we grew quiet once more. Sunset silently arrived, followed by a glowing gloaming. The first stars appeared. Then a crescent moon came into view. And then a dozen more stars. And then a bright planet Venus. *Wow! All of these celestial bodies seem to have stringy linkages with each other. / What a universe it is! / What will this night matter thirty years from now? Will I still even be alive? / Wonder how many times Dr. Kron stared up at the night sky from this knoll? What were his thoughts?*

The psychoactive ingredient from all of the day's dosings seemed to hit a crescendo as darkness settled to grass level. We were essentially speechless for about two hours. Our thoughts twisted through the trees. *What a magical night in North America. Yeah, just somewhere in North America with thoughts ripped asunder. / I wonder who or what is lurking. / I'd like to put this day in a jar for future reference. Maybe write a song based on it. / I wish I had my motorcycle up here. The ride would be freaking awesome.*

Then, at maybe ten o'clock (my best guess; no, I didn't look at my watch), Frank got up and walked over to the Kron House. He peered in the now-almost-black windows.

"Hey guys, I think I just saw the ghost of Dr. Kron," Frank shouted back at the supine three of us.

"Oh, really," I said as I rose to my feet, feeling a head rush. "Let me see if I can verify that for you." *Tryke, the apparition verifier? Please. / Too funny.*

Burke and Mary followed suit, and we all walked over to the Kron House and peered in the windows. Not sure what they saw paranormal-wise (if anything), but when I pulled my face back I saw my eerie dark reflection with the electric sky behind my head. *Wow! I look like one hopelessly lost soul in the cosmic sea.*

Frank then grabbed the back doorknob and gave it a turn. It was locked. *Why does he want to go in there? / No, let's not go in there. / This is where we get busted.*

“We don’t really want to sleep in there, do we, Frank?” Mary asked. *Hell no. / I’ll pass on that. / They really thought that I wanted to sleep in there?*

“Just checking to make sure it’s locked,” Frank said. “Don’t want a black bear to get in there and eat Little Red Riding Hood.” *What? / Huh?*

“I think that you’ve got your fairy tales mixed up, Frank,” I said. “It was a big, bad wolf – not a bear.” *Please, no bears.*

“Just checking, just checking,” Frank slyly said.

Suddenly, we heard a very strange sound, just like a baking pin rolling down the hood of a car. *What in this increasingly bizarre world was that?! / What a weird sound! That didn’t sound like an acorn. / What an odd noise that was. Almost sounded like my metal flashlight rolling on the roof of Mary’s car. Where is my flashlight? Did I leave it on the Valiant? No, it’s in my backpack. / Was something just on my car’s roof, hood or trunk? Gosh, I hope there is no damage.*

We froze behind the Kron House. We remained silent for ten seconds. Then Burke offered up the \$64K question: “What should we do now?” *Yes, what?*

“Let’s just stay right here for a few minutes, remaining silent,” Mary said. *Sounds good to me.*

“But, if someone is coming up right now, they will see our blankets on the lawn and know we’re nearby,” Frank smartly remarked. “I am going to run over there and gather up everything and put it in the woods, way out of view. I will hide

behind the big oak tree until the coast is clear. I suggest that you guys go hide in the woods. Whoever it is will look back here. Go down the cemetery trail a hundred or so feet and observe the situation through the trees.” *That’s actually a better plan.* / *Seems like the best thing to do, I guess.* / *His thinking sure is much sharper than mine.* / *Hope they don’t get lost in the woods.*

Frank then scurried away towards our blanketed encampment as the rest of us made our way to the Kron gravesite footpath. *Hope this plan works.* / *Damn, I hope we don’t get detected.* / *Must try to stay smart, even though I’m seeing distractions everywhere.* / *Hope Tryke can stay quiet.*

Frank hid the blankets and drinks in the woods and settled behind the massive trunk of the mighty oak tree, occasionally peeking out at the top of the steps. *No one yet.* *Maybe we get lucky.*

Burke, Mary and I quietly walked down the graveyard path about thirty yards, which was as far as we could go and still have a view of the back of the Kron House. We were silent. It was so quiet outside. *So far, so good.* / *No one yet.* / *Crossing my mental fingers.*

Then, after maybe three or four minutes, we heard a crackling sound at ground level. To our relief, it was just a marmot wandering about and grousing (it seemed to me). *Whew!* / *Thank God.* / *What a scare that rodent gave me.*

At the nine-minute mark, I whispered to Burke and Mary: “I think that the coast is now clear. Want to slowly start walking back?”

“Ok,” Mary said. “But, let’s all be extra-quiet. No heavy feet on the twigs.” *Sage advice. / I see twigs everywhere. This will be hard. / I sure hope that they can keep their shoe noise to a minimum.*

Thirteen minutes after the mysterious rolling-object sound, we were all back behind the Kron House. We all felt quite relieved, but were still unsure if we were totally in the clear.

“Did you see anyone, Frank?” Mary asked.

“No, no one,” Frank replied. “How about you guys?”

“Nothing but a crawling critter,” Burke replied. *A crawling critter? Or, a carpet crawler?*

“Well, what do you think that we should do now?” I asked.

“Maybe we should spy the parking lot,” Mary suggested.

“I will stealthily survey it,” Frank said. “You guys just wait back here. I’ll be back in three minutes, tops.”

Frank then departed, heading for the steps that lead down to the parking lot. He remained quiet; we never heard his footsteps, or anything.

He came sprinting back just four minutes later with a big shark grin on his face. He alighted about ten feet from us, huffing and puffing.

“Dudes, we dodged a big bullet,” he said. “There’s no person, animal, or extraterrestrial alien down there. Your car looks fine, Mary. All of the doors are still shut and locked.

And, the parking lot gate is still wide open.” *Good, we didn’t get locked in. / Excellent report. / Ah, most-favorable news.*

“What a relief!” I exclaimed.

“Let’s take that as an omen to leave and return to the campground,” Mary said. *Yeah, maybe a harbinger of something untoward in the offing. / Yes, let’s go. That was our important portent. / So, this is it for here. What a night. Goodbye Kron clan.*

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” Burke said. “I am starting to come down, anyway.”

“I think that drama brought me down a few astral planes,” I added. *Astral planes? / He’s still flying.*

We then got the blankets and drinks from behind the humongous oak tree and headed back for the veritable Valiant. I looked up at the tree for one last time. *Another strange tale for the wise old oak tree to reminisce about some evening.*

We reloaded the car. Mary drove us back to the hushed campground without a discernible incident, except for passing an entering car halfway down the Kron House road. *If they only knew ... / Whew, that was a close call. / Perfect exit timing. / So sad: They’ll never know of our astounding ad hoc adventure.*

I saw a plethora of otherworldly images passing by in the dark woods. However, I just remained silent. I’m sure that the other three were seeing some bizarre things, too.

When we reached our campsite it was – could you believe? – 11:11. And as soon as we disembarked from the car, a thin, middle-age, white-haired, 50-something, Caucasian man emerged from a pup tent in the campsite right next to ours. *Not a nut-job. Not now. / I hope he's not a psycho. / This guy looks like a wig. / Is this where we end up being a news story?*

He looked excited, and yet a little perturbed. He tilted up his Montréal Expos baseball cap, shined a flashlight on his face, (upward from below his chin) and queried us: “Kron by night?”



**45. Le Noir de Lenoir** (October 2015)

Then, there we (Monique, Kirk and I; Agents 32, 666 and 33, respectively) were, driving around Lenoir (NC) on a splendid Saturday fall afternoon, looking for an Asian grocery store that Monique said that she saw in a Google search. *Is there really an Asian grocery store in this little town?*

I turned left onto Morganton Boulevard SW from Harper Avenue NW. I started to scan for the *fair value* store.

“Well, guys, what side of the street do you think 2025 is on?” I asked.

Monique, who was riding shotgun in our gray Kia Rio hatchback, gave me a blank-bot [sic] look.

Kirk, who was seated behind her, quickly spoke up. “Are we going towards or away from downtown?” he asked.

“We are headed towards downtown,” I replied.

“Then 2025 will be on the right,” Kirk confidently announced.

“How do you know that, Kirk?” Monique asked, somewhat surprised by his assured proclamation.

“The OR-OR rule,” Kirk proudly stated. “On returning to the center of a town, the odd address numbers will be on the right. Get it? O for On, R for Returning, O for Odd, and R for Right. OR-OR.”

“Ah, you remembered it, Kirk!” I exclaimed. “The corollary is the OL-OL rule, Agent 32. On Leaving, Odd Left.”

“You have way too much time on your maps, Agents 33 and 666,” Monique blurted. *Way too much time on your maps? That sure was a strange phrase. I’ll make sure that I use that when I write up this day. / I’m sure that he’s already switched that darn digital audio recorder on. I bet he has it hidden in his shirt pocket.*

Kirk soon spotted an odd-numbered address on the right side of the five-lane highway (NC 18 and US 64). “See there, look at that address number!”

“Ah, I see,” Monique said. “Very smart, Kirk.”

Soon, we were pulling into the grocery store’s parking lot. Once inside the store, Monique frantically searched for the Asian food section. But, it was to no avail.

“I don’t see any Asian food aisles, 33.” *I’ll call him by his agent number in here. He seems to like that in public places.*

“I don’t, either, 32.” *She’s already hip to my recording. / Dad is in psecret psociety mode.*

“But, why did it come up in my Google search results?” Monique asked with a confused look on her face.

“What keywords did you enter?” I asked as we stopped in the snack aisle.

“Asian grocery stores Lenoir,” Agent 32 recited.

“Because there are no Asian grocery stores in Lenoir, it probably just gave Asian a strikethrough and searched for grocery stores in Lenoir,” I theorized.

She shook her head. Kirk and I gathered some chips.

At the checkout register, there was a dark-skinned, black-haired, short in stature, middle-age Latino in front of us. He ended up with seven plastic bags full of assorted groceries, including canned goods.

“Could you double-bag them, please?” he asked the bagger in a Central American accent.

“Sure,” the blonde-haired, courteous, high-school-age, male worker replied.

The dark Hispanic man then turned to us and plainly stated: “I have a long walk.” He smiled as he tied several of the bags together. Then he hoisted the chain of plastic bags over his right shoulder and marched out of the store. *I wonder how far he has to go with that load. / Should we have offered him a ride? No, it's too risky in America. This is not the Philippines anymore. / Poor man. I don't want to end up like that when I grow up.*

A few minutes later, we were back in our car. As we began to leave the parking lot, we spotted *the walking man* as he ambled diagonally across Morganton Boulevard SW at Fairview Drive SW. He continued walking through the parking lot of a newer cinema. Then he disappeared into the woods behind the freestanding theater building.

“There he goes,” Monique said.

“Yes, there goes Le Noir de Lenoir,” I added. *Luh-nwar?*

“What does *luh nwar* mean, dad?” Kirk asked.

“It’s French for the dark-skinned man,” I said.

“A man of swarthy complexion or of dark appearance with bleak prospects,” Monique read from her smartphone. *Swarthy? Bleak prospects? I wonder what website that is.*

“Also, it’s spelled just like Lenoir – just split it into two words,” I tacked on. “L-e, pronounced luh, means the in French. N-o-i-r, pronounced nwar, means dark or black.”

“This town is named for a poor dark-skinned man?” Kirk asked. *That seems very odd.*

“No, it’s named in honor of an Anglo Revolutionary War general – William Lenoir,” Monique said, reading from her cell phone. “He was a genuine Whig.” *She sure is quick with the Wikipedia today.*

Kirk laughed. “A genuine wig? Now, that’s funny! Wig out!” *Where did he learn that term? Probably from me, I guess.*

“W-h-i-g, Kirk – not w-i-g,” Monique stated, still looking down at her compact LG smartphone’s screen. “It was a major political party of those times.” *Whigs in wigs.*

When we arrived at the corner of Boundary Street NW and West Avenue NW, I looked over to the right. Coming up to the old Center Theater marquee was no other than the walking man himself, still weighed down by 40 or so pounds of plastic-sacked groceries.

“Look!” I exclaimed to my wife and son. “There’s our man, and he’s still walking.” *Our man? / He’s walking himself right into a psecret psociety pshort pstory [sic] with each step that he takes.*

“Le Noir really is on a long walk,” Kirk said.

“He certainly is,” Monique added.

A luridly dressed, quite overweight, African American lady was exiting Piccolo’s Pizza. She momentarily arrested our eyes. She had three boxes of pizza in her hands. Her red scarf sailed behind her in the breeze as she began to walk towards Church Street.

The traffic light turned green. I started to go straight across West Avenue. When I looked to the right for Le Noir, he was gone! *Where in the world did he go? How did he just vanish like that?*

I slowed way down and looked in my rear-view mirror. No one was behind me. I then made a hard right turn onto West Avenue NW, ending up in the far left lane. *Now, where did he slip away? / What is dad doing now?*

I slowly passed the World War II era, very dilapidated, boarded-up Center movie theater building. A nook between the Center and the smaller, not as old, stucco-and-brick building caught my eye. *Did he disappear through one of those doors? Is he secretly squatting in a room in the Center Theater?*

“What are you looking at, dad?” Kirk asked.

“Oh, just trying to figure out where that man carrying all those grocery bags disappeared to,” I said.

“Maybe he went into that building [the adjacent, smaller, newer building] for substance abuse counseling,” Monique suggested as she read the words on the front window.

“But, Agent 32, the sign on the door says *CLOSED*, and there are no lights on in there,” I said. “There’s no one in that building right now.” *How can he be sure of that?*

“Maybe he has a key to the movie theater,” Kirk suggested.

“Yeah, maybe so, Kirk,” I said as I noticed a trailing Lenoir police car. “Whoops! Time to move along.”

I accelerated back up to 20 MPH (from 5). The police cruiser turned in at the Law Enforcement Center. *Whew! Thought I had a light out. Thought I had a ticket coming.*

“Well, guys, it seems that Monsieur [Mister in French] Le Noir has given us the slip,” I announced as I turned right onto Willow Street NW.

“I wonder if he is really living in that old theater,” Kirk said. “That would be a cool place to live.”

“But, where would you take a shower in there, Kirk?” Monique asked.

“Maybe he has rigged up something,” Kirk offered.

“Well, if nothing else, Le Noir has made himself worthy of a short story.” *I knew it. / What?*

“But, dad, will he ever know about it? Will he ever find it on the internet? Would he even search for it?”

“You never know, son. You just never know who will read what, when and where.”

“Dad, are you really going to make this little episode into another one of your short stories?”

#### 46. Raleigh by Railway (November 2015)

Raleigh, the rapidly populating capital of North Carolina, was next on our list. Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) would elect to go by rail, as the iconic, roughly round, downtown Holiday Inn was only a ten-minute walk from the Raleigh Amtrak station.

We sat down at the end of a long wooden pew in the old Norfolk Southern freight office, the current Charlotte Amtrak station, about a mile and a half northeast of the center of uptown. Ten minutes later, at 11:30 AM, there was an announcement: "Train 74 to Raleigh has been delayed 74 minutes due to freight traffic and track work. We expect it in here at 1:11." *Seventy-four, seventy-four. Hope the recorder picked that up.*

"What track work?" Monique asked.

"Oh, they're in the process of double-tracking the whole stretch between Charlotte and Raleigh, Agent 32." *Agent 32. He's already switched the recorder on.*

"Oh, I didn't know it was a shared single track, 33."

"Well, most of it is. There are some sidings and existing double-track sections. They're also eliminating the sharp curves for future high-speed trains."

The train finally arrived. We boarded and left Charlotte 80 minutes late at 1:20 PM on a warmer than normal Tuesday November afternoon. Our rail journey to Raleigh was further



delayed by a speed reduction after Kannapolis due to a freight train in front of us.

Once we crossed the Yadkin River and passed under Interstate 85, we were able to overtake the freight train in question at a large rail yard next to a swampy area of High Rock Lake. *That must be Mosquitoville in the summer.*

The Triad cities of High Point, Greensboro and Burlington flew by with nary anything of psecret psociety note (though I was in a daze and could have missed something).

When we stopped in Durham, I saw a Caucasian, 50-something, frail man walking past the bus station. He kind of looked like Mr. Malloy. (Mr. Malloy is a character who features in the novella *Mysterieau of San Francisco* and in the *A Search for Sidle on N and Vermont Street* short stories.) However, when the man turned to cross the street, it was apparent that he was someone else. *That man probably has no idea who Mr. Malloy is. Nor, that I compared him with such a semi-fictional person.*

In the Triangle city of Cary, a horde of people got off *The Piedmont*, as this Amtrak route is named.

"Wow, so many people are getting off here, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] Is Cary bigger than Raleigh?"

"No, 32, but it is the fastest growing city in North Carolina, I believe. It's a bedroom community of Raleigh."

Soon we were rolling into the Raleigh Amtrak station. I looked at my cell phone when the train came to a grinding

halt. It was 4:44 PM. *Ninety-three minutes late. Glad we have no appointments today.*

We threw on our backpacks, exited the train, and walked east on West Cabarrus Avenue. After crossing the railroad tracks, we turned left on South Dawson Street. After gallivanting five blocks northward, we were at the landmark Holiday Inn on Hillsborough Street. *Wow, I remember seeing this being built as a kid. Must have been '69, maybe '70.*

“Well, we’re already here, Monique. That walk wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“Piece o’ cake, Parkaar.”

We entered the hotel lobby and made our way to the check-in counter. The older African American lady looked up from her computer screen. I gave her my last name and she gave us a room on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor. She then handed me the card keys. *These two look like they are up to something.*

“Thanks,” I said.

“And here’s your parking pass,” she said. “Just keep it on your dashboard.”

“Oh, we didn’t drive,” I said. “We came by train.”

“Ah, Raleigh by railway.” *By railway? How did she know?*

“By Amtrak 74,” Monique clarified.

“Well, you two have a nice, carefree, car-free stay.” *That was a nice turn of a phrase by her. Hope the recorder got that.*

We thanked her and then entered the central elevator. I suddenly noticed that there was no 13 button.

“Look, Monique, superstitious architects.”

“What do you mean, 33?”

“No thirteenth floor in this hotel.”

Monique studied the rows of floor buttons. “Oh, yes, I see. Why is that, Parkaar?”

“Many people consider 13 to be the ultimate bad-luck number in America. Thus, if this hotel had a 13<sup>th</sup> floor, it would probably be consistently vacant, as many people would not want to stay on such a floor. Most of the rooms would go unbooked. The hotel would not make as much money per square foot.” *Per square foot? He must have read something about how hotels work.*

“Unbooked? Not even if offered at a reduced rate?”

“The hotel probably wants to avoid doing that.”

“But, the 14<sup>th</sup> floor then is actually the 13<sup>th</sup> floor.” *Wow, I didn't think of that. Very perspicacious of her.*

“Great observation, Agent 32. But, I'm not a superstitious type. Well, not until I drop a thin-glassed vase on my shoeless left foot tonight.” *Thin-glassed vase? Shoeless left foot? He's just speaking for the recorder.*

“Or, fall through the window?” Monique added with an ostentatious smirk.

“I think we covered falls from fatal heights in *The Balcony*, [a 2014 short story] Agent 32.”

We both were chuckling as we exited the elevator. We curved to the left. Soon we were entering room 1406.

We were travel-fatigued. We took a nap on the plush extra-king-size bed. I awoke at 6:26 PM, as announced by the LED alarm clock on the nightstand. Monique’s eyes opened three minutes later.

“Hungry?” I asked Monique.

“Famished,” she said while rubbing her brown pinay [a female from the Philippines] eyes.

“What kind of food were you thinking?”

“I’m open.”

“This hotel has a nice restaurant on the top floor. I’m sure the view is superb.”

“Wow! Yeah, let’s just do that.”

We freshened up and then exited the room. I walked to the right and Monique followed. I wanted to see if anything unique was on the other arc of the circular corridor.

I stopped at the stairway door and looked at Monique. “Want to walk up?”

“How many floors?”

“The brochure in the room said that the Skye Tower Restaurant was on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor. So, what is that? Six floors?”

“Ok, sure. I need the exercise.”

I opened the stairway door and quickly noticed a chain-link-fence-like partition between the four-foot gap between this door and the next door. There was an air shaft that ran the complete height of the hotel. It was very eerie. And, it was dead quiet. *How in the world did this pass NC fire code? Oh, wait, it's probably grandfathered in. How secure is this fence?*

We walked in and I gave the fence-screen a shake. It was secure. I then studied the shape of the air shaft.

“This seems like a horrible waste of space, Monique. You could cut in some storage rooms and still have plenty of room for a utility chase. What were the architects thinking?”

“Maybe there were considerations at the time that only they know about.” *Probably so. This weird space is certainly worth mentioning when I write up our Raleigh adventure.*

“I've never seen anything like this in all of the fire-rated stairways that I have inspected.”

“Well, let's get moving. This place gives me the creeps!”

“Just a second or seventeen, 32.” *Or 17?*

I then removed a blank notecard and pen from my shirt pocket and wrote:

“A penny for your thoughts.” – Ernie of psecret psociety

I then pulled a penny out of my right pants pocket and neatly folded the notecard around it. Then I dropped note-wrapped penny through the fence-screen. I never heard it hit anything. *Good, no one was down there.*

“Are you crazy?!” Monique cried out.

“Now, you already know the answer to that question, 32.”

“That could have hit a worker down there.”

“Very unlikely. I made sure that the air shaft was free of all humans.”

“How? You can’t see all the way to the bottom!”

“But, one can hear all the way to the bottom.” *Why did I even ask?*

We then marched up four flights of stairs. This is when Monique felt out-of-breath. We took the elevator up the last two floors.

When the elevator doors opened, we were at the upscale restaurant. There were five young white dudes lazily watching sports news at the bar. Three older Caucasian diners were eating near the wrap-around window.

The hostess quickly seated us at a booth with an eastern vista. It was twilight now. I quickly spotted the Capitol and pointed it out to Monique.

Monique then spied the PNC Building. “What does PNC stand for, 33?”

“Proper Noun Challenge,” I replied. *Yep, he’s still recording.*

“I just had to ask!” she exclaimed.

We both had a short laugh.

A few minutes later a mixed-race waitress arrived. “Ready to order something to drink?”

“Sure,” I said. “Two bottles of Hoppyum IPA. And, I think we already know what we’d like to eat.”

“Ok, go ahead,” she said as she tried to get her ball-point pen to write.

“The Asian bowl for the lady and a Margherita flatbreader [sic] for me.” *Flatbreader?*

“Ok, got it,” she said. “And, where are you guys from?”

“Charlotte, but I lived in Raleigh many moons ago,” I said. *Many moons ago? He doesn’t look Native American at all.*

“We took the Amtrak up,” Monique added.

“So, Raleigh by railway.” *Wow! How strange. She’s the second person to say that exact phrase today.*

“Yep, I guess so,” I said. *He guesses?*

The waitress disappeared. Monique and I just studied the mostly new to me – and certainly to her – Raleigh skyline.

Two minutes later our India pale ales arrived. We sipped at them as the lights dimmed inside the torus rooftop restaurant. My mind got lost in Monique's pretty brown eyes for a few moments. It was a sublime setting. *What an exquisite scene. Superb.*

"Agent 32, can you believe that two people have said the phrase 'Raleigh by railway' in the short time that we've been here?" *Does he think that I'm going deaf?*

"Maybe you should mention that in your next short story, Agent 33." *I certainly will.*

"Sage idea, 32."

"Rubbed or ground, 33? She smiled.

We both had a chortle. *When did we discuss that one?*

Our waitress soon returned with our entrees. My flatbread pizza was Fair Play, South Carolina to Midland, North Carolina. Monique's Asian bowl was mantle-worthy.

We ate and drank, paid up, and returned to our room. We tried to watch all of the local WRAL newscast, but only made it to the weather segment. The last words heard: "A low tomorrow morning of 59; high around 70 with a chance of intermittent drizzle."

I awoke at 6:38 AM as the city of oaks was overtaken by a battleship-gray dawn. I made some coffee while Monique slept. My mind began to wander as I stared out the window. *I wonder how many people have stayed in this room. The*



*exact number. 13,013? Were any of them early morning wonderers? Did any have bizarre personal stories? Were any fascinated or disturbed by that air shaft? Did any think of life in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century? Did any pause and think: I hope no freak earthquake occurs right now.*

At 7:17 we were on the sidewalk. As we walked east on Hillsborough Street, the first edifice that we came upon was Cathedral School. It was surrounded by a black wrought iron fence. There was a statue of Mary inset into the side of the stone building that caught Monique's eye.

"Take a picture of me here, 33," she implored.

"Ok, sure. I think that this is the school that my mom attended."

"Really?"

"Yep, yep, yep."

"Ok, just take the pic and stop impersonating Mr. Malloy."

I obliged. Then we continued our mild morning walk towards the Capitol.

After a coffee-with-muffin breakfast at Café Carolina on Fayetteville Street, we headed for the Moore Square Transit Station. There I bought two day passes for a total of \$5. *What a deal! Unlimited local rides for only \$2.50 each. Wish Charlotte would go to this pricing scheme.*

After about five minutes of waiting, we boarded the route 6 bus. We rolled northward out of a downtown Raleigh that was starting another overcast workday.

We disembarked at Glenwood Avenue and St. Mary's Street and began walking down Anderson Drive. At Cooleemee Drive, we turned right.

"How much farther?" Monique asked.

"We're almost there," I assured her. "The next street is Kittrell Drive. Then it's just two more blocks."

We made a left onto Kittrell Drive. I noticed that the old neighborhood had gentrified. Interspersed amongst the original two-bedroom, 900-square-foot houses were 5-bedroom, 3,500-square-foot McMansions. *Never would have guessed that this would happen. It was such a sleepy, spartan, lower-to-middle-class neighborhood back then.*

We arrived at 281[ ]. I looked up at the palatial estate. *Where once was ... is no more.*

Monique looked at me. "Did you live in that house, Parkaar?"

"No, not *that* house. But, this is the lot, 32. Our house was much, much smaller. Joe and I slept in the attic. We loved it."

I then looked across the street. Monique turned her gaze to the wooded park, too.

"It looks about the same on this side of the street, Monique. We had some fun times down there. I remember playing on some stone ruins of a small structure. It made for a perfect

fort. Even remember sledding down the hill and almost going into the creek that runs the length of this skinny park. *Was it the winter of '68?*

“Fond childhood memories?”

“Absolutely.”

We moseyed along and turned left onto Overbrook Drive. Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School was now on our right.

“Well, that’s where I attended kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade,” I said while pointing at a classroom on the end of the older building.

“Were you a good student, Parkaar?”

“Shy. Docile. Didn’t get into too much trouble.”

We continued walking up to Anderson Drive and snapped some pics in front of the old church building. Then we walked down to the bridge over Crabtree Creek. I stopped on the sidewalk in the middle of the bridge and looked down at the brown, swollen stream.

“I can remember going for a walk down to this creek with my dad and brother. It looked like it does right now – somewhat higher than normal. We were walking across the creek on a pipe when we saw a cat floating down the river, frantically trying to get out.”

“Did it get out?”

“Yeah, I remember seeing the cat clutch a tree branch after going under the pipe. It then cautiously crawled up the limb to the bank. Just one of those images that you don’t forget.” *I wonder if he embellished that memory.*

“Perhaps that feline entered Raleigh by waterway.” Monique laughed at her little joke.

I soon joined her chuckle. *Such a long time ago.*

“Good one, 32. That’s a keeper. I’ll use that in the story.” *I’m sure he will.*

We then continued our walk to Six Forks Road, where we made a right. At a Shell gas station we stopped in for some coffee. Monique had hit a blood-sugar low. We carbed up and took a ten-minute break.

Before leaving the store, I asked the cashier if there was a bus stop ahead. He told us that we could catch a bus on Wake Forest Road, which was just a couple of blocks ahead on the other side of Creekside Crossing, a strip-mall shopping center. We followed his directions.

Once on the downtown-bound route 2 bus, we were engaged in conversation by a gregarious baldheaded man of Mediterranean complexion with a large C-shaped crystal-studded earring on his left ear.

“Would you guys know where an eye clinic is on this street?” he asked from a side seat at the front of the bus.

“No, I sure don’t,” I answered from the first forward-facing seat. “I haven’t lived here in eons.”

“Me, either,” he said. “I left about fifteen years ago, and it all looks so very different. And, my lousy eyesight isn’t helping things. By the way, where did you guys come in from?”

“Charlotte,” I said. “We took the train.”

“Ah, fellow Amtrakkers. [*sic*] I’ve taken that train before.”  
*Good, he didn’t say ‘Raleigh by railway.’ If he would have, I would have thought we were living out a Rod Serling script.*

“So, where are you from?” I asked.

“Queens, New York. Father was a crazy Italian; mother was a petite, yet quite fiery, Puerto Rican. Go figure how they met. Grew up in the shadow of Shea Stadium. Feel free to insert your best Mets-choke joke.”

“Hey, they won the NL East for the first time in ages.”

“That’s what I tell my pessimistic friends in Flushing. Baby steps. Must walk before you can run.”

“Maybe they will win it next year. The Royals lost last year, you know.”

“Yes, to my dad’s team: the Giants. He used to go see them play at the Polo Grounds. He hated the Yankees and the Dodgers with venomous passion.”

“The Giants: That’s our team, too,” Monique chirped.

“The even years have been good to us as of late,” I added.

“Yes, they certainly have,” he concurred.

“There’s an optometrist over there!” Monique blurted.

The man from Queens looked over at the small, free-standing, off-white building and immediately pulled the stop-request cord. He was elated at what he saw.

“That’s it! Thanks so much, lovely lady. Hope both of you have a wonderful time in Raleigh. Safe travels. Until next time – even if there isn’t a next time – up, up and away!”

“Likewise, and take care,” I said as he got up to exit the bus.

He shook our hands. Then he got his backpack properly positioned. He was really anxious to get new lenses.

The bus stopped and he thanked the driver as he made his quick exit. We saw him scurry across an asphalt parking lot under a stratonimbus sky as the bus began to pull away. Then he disappeared into the eye doctor’s office. *Wonder what becomes of him. I’m sure that he has plenty of stories to tell. Too bad he wasn’t on the bus longer. He’ll most likely never know that he’ll figure into a short story, and kept it going. What a character. Great positive, interesting personality. Might he be a writer himself? Could I be mentioned in his next tale? Ah, this strange life. / I bet he recorded that conversation. I know he did. He seems quite content with how that went down.*

Soon we were back in downtown Raleigh. We got off at a bus stop across from the Capitol on South Salisbury Street and began looking for a place to eat lunch.

The air was misty and the sky remained overcast as we turned left onto Morgan Street. Two blocks later we were at South Wilmington Street. When I looked down that street, I spotted a Mexican restaurant on the right called Centro. It did the trick.

Thirty-five minutes later, feeling completely satiated, we reemerged on the sidewalk.

“Want to check out more of downtown before we head back to the hotel, 32?”

“Sure, why not? It’s not raining.” *Though it could start at any moment.*

We walked down South Wilmington Street to Hargett Street. When I looked to the east, I spotted a Union Jack and an England flag flying from the façade of an establishment on the right side of the street. *I bet they show soccer/football matches in there. Liverpool has a Europa League game at 1:00. I wonder if they like or hate Liverpool.*

“Monique, want to check out that bar down there? They might show the Liverpool match.”

“Yes! Absolutely.”

We walked only about forty feet to arrive at The London Bridge Pub. I pulled the door open and immediately felt at

home. There was a framed Gerrard jersey on the wall and a white guy (one of the owners) decked out in a red-and-black Liverpool FC jacket. He welcomed us in and told us that they would indeed be showing the Liverpool – Rubin Kazan match. It was 12:53 PM.

We took a seat on a cushioned bench with a high backrest. It was comfortable. I ordered two seasonal micro-brews for us.

Soon the Raleigh Reds – LFC (Liverpool Football Club) fans from Wake County – were filling the English-themed tavern. At 1:00 PM sharp, the Europa League match kicked off.

Liverpool seemed to get the better of play in the first half. However, the score was nil-nil at the break. In the 52<sup>nd</sup> minute of the second half, Jordan Ibe put it in the back of the net, giving LFC a 1-0 lead. The bar erupted with cheers and familiar chants. The lead would hold up. We all sang YNWA (You'll Never Walk Alone) after the referee's triple-whistle to end the match. *Tra-la-la. Wonder how deep the Mersey is at the mouth.*

Then a Raleigh Reds lad in a white LFC away jersey came up to our table and noticed our chair-occupying backpacks.

"Are you guys on a cross-country journey?" he drolly asked.

"We're on a Liverpool bar tour of America," I replied.

"Really?" he asked, totally believing my fallacious statement.

"No, just an intra-state excursion," I replied.

"We took the Amtrak from Charlotte," Monique tacked on.



*“I see. Raleigh by railway.” Well, there’s strike three. We’re out. Time for us to start heading back to CLT. [Charlotte’s three-letter airport code]*

#### 47. **December Delirium** (December 2015)

It was a leisurely, albeit quite smoky, teenage drive with future Agent 107 (the late, great Frank N. Peck). We were in his 1975 burnt orange Ford Maverick, driving northwest into Charlotte from Matthews (NC) on US 74 in December of 1981. But, as he slowed down for a red traffic light, we advanced thirty-four years in just 3.4 seconds. Yes, it was suddenly December 2015, and our driver Frank is now just a serene, ashen-faced ghost.

“That department store was over there, Frank. Yes, on that very corner. Buick Drive at Independence Boulevard. Or, was it Electra Lane? Oh well, you know; it’s not important now, I guess.”

Frank just nodded. Then, the saddest smile overtook his ethereal countenance.

I continued with my east Charlotte geography update and recollections. “Notice the overpass they recently built. Conference Drive. Yeah, the retail outfit over there was called Service Merchandise. Such an odd combination of nouns. Yep, I remember it.”

“Are you sure?” a holographic Frank asked in a whisper from my left, sensing my flickering (and faltering?) memory. *His neural circuits are going, but old Mike doesn’t realize it yet.*

“Oh, yeah; that was where it was. Maybe it closed before you guys got down here in ’79, or shortly thereafter. I remember the LED watches in their one-inch-thick catalog.

Remember those store catalogs? They mailed them out to the surrounding neighborhoods.” I chuckled for a second.

Frank just murmured, “L-E-D.”

“Yeah, Frank, LED watches were a relatively new thing then. And, they weren’t cheap. Some models were well over \$100. One hundred 1981 dollars, that is, Frank. Oh, Pulsar was the daddy brand. We all wanted one. And, get this, all the LED watches were set to 11:49 in the catalog. Don’t ask me why I remembered this.” *Were they set to 11:49 in the store, too?*

“AM or PM?” the Frank apparition quickly asked much more clearly. *Why in the weird world did he ask that?*

“Not sure on that, Frank. However, I often wondered if the 11:49 display time was to show off as many LED segments as possible. But, as I thought it out in my mind, that hunch would prove to be wrong, as the numbers 6 and 9 have six segments each. The number 5 has five, and the number 4 has four. I realized this after waking up at 6:54 one Saturday morning in June.” *Yeah, I’m sure, dude.*

“So, you think that 6:59 or 9:56 would display the most LED segments, is that right?” Frank asked with a lost-in-thought, Earth-is-now-so-trite look.

“Well, let’s see, Frank. There are seventeen LED segments in 6:59 and 9:56. There are only fourteen in 11:49. Thus, be careful. Your bane isn’t totally braked yet, Frank.” *The bane of cold rain in Spain.*

“Bane braked? Now, listen to you, Mike. You have got to be the word murderer of the century. Pure linguistic poison, you spout. Yeah, my old friend, your brain is just toxic letter-shaped linguine.” *Letter-shaped linguine? Where do you buy that pasta?*

“Maybe so, maybe sew. Hey, what about 12:59?”

“What about it?” the phantom Frank quipped.

“I count eighteen segments in that time. Looks like I win.”

“Eighteen segments in that time. Sounds like the title to a novel, Mike van Tryke. [my nickname and later visual art name] Yeah, your addition is correct: Eighteen LED segmentations it is. Perhaps you got me this time.”

“You can post 12:56 and we’ll call it a draw, Frank.”

“Will you let me post 12:99 in overtime?”

“Only if I can post 12:66,” I retorted. *Still a draw.*

“Well, if we’re going that far off the conventional clock, I’ll post 99:99. That’s a total of twenty-four segments for that 24-karat gold medal.” *Fool’s gold.*

“You haven’t taken the gold medal yet, Frank. 12:99 equates to 1:39.”

“Equates to 1:39? What temporal nonsense you speak!”

“Yeah. Sure. 12:00 plus 99 minutes equals 1:39. AM or PM: It’s your choice. Therefore, my eternally stoned comrade, your LED segment total is only thirteen.”

“Thirteen?”

“Yep. That’s it. Number 1 has two segments; number 3 has five segments; number 9 has six segments. Two plus five plus six yields thirteen.” *Yields?*

“And, what about your time?” *My time while still alive?*

“My time of 12:66 equals 1:06. There are fourteen segments in that LED time.” *LED, Life Externalizing Diversion.*

Frank was quiet for a few seconds, scratching his dark brown beard with his right hand. He was cranking through possible digits in his head. A THC-fueled numerical analysis was in progress. *I wonder what his mind will stumble upon.*

“Ready to throw in the towel and buy me a frozen yoghurt to ameliorate my scorched throat?” I finally asked with glee. *Tryke’s got a big surprise coming.*

“12:58,” he suddenly blurted. *Damn, that might be the gold-medal winner.*

“Darn, how many segments are in that diode time?” I asked knowing that the answer was probably higher than eighteen.

“Nineteen. You can’t get any more than that with a legal twelve-hour time. It’s the absolute max. Looks like you’ll be buying again, sport.” *Darn, how did I overlook the seven-*

*segment number 8? It's the equivalent of the letter Q in Scrabble.*

"Maybe we can amend the rules to make it more interesting," I ruefully suggested.

"Take your loss gracefully, pal. Don't dig a deeper grave."

"The hours are numbered 1 to 12, Frank, just like the months of the year. So ..."

"So, so, so. No, no, no. However you are trying to extend this match of wits – just forget it."

"Don't you want to hear me out, meta-real one?"

"The minutes go up to 59, whereas the days in a month only go up to 31 in the longest ones. No correlation. So, I don't see how you extend this, Tryke. Accept your certain defeat."

I brooded for a few minutes and took another drag on Frank's chrome peace pipe. The hash was cross-hatching my neurons. I was clawing for a clever thought, and sliding further into insipidity. Finally, I thought about December dates. I realized that today was the 8<sup>th</sup>. *Eureka!*

"That Moody Blues concert was a week ago tonight. So, what is today's date, Frank?"

"Uh, let me think ... December 8<sup>th</sup>."

"And December 8<sup>th</sup> is commonly shortened to what series of numbers in America?"

“12:08,” Frank said in a cautious, measured tone. *I can tell that he senses a reversal of fortune. This is going to be sweet. So sweet.*

“At 12:08 PM tomorrow, you can buy me a mushroom and onion pizza at Godfather’s on Albemarle Road.” *Damn, 12:08 has twenty freaking segments! Is that the most? Is that the absolute winning LED-segmented time? / I got him good.*

“Hold on,” Frank then muttered. “Let me have a few minutes to run some more numbers.” *He’s doomed. He’s wallowing in neural quicksand. I’ll let him flounder in his inevitable loss for a while before declaring outright victory.*

“The clock has started. Start renumerating. [sic] You’ve got two minutes. And not a second more.” *He sounds just like a referee.*

Frank was looking down. Then, after twenty-two seconds and one mighty drag on his Winston cigarette followed by a quick pipe inhalation, he looked up at his stereo’s display in the middle of the dashboard and pointed to it. The time was 10:08. *Oh, dear. Trouble in red-clay city.*

“You see what time it is, Tryke?” Frank asked as he exhaled a huge plume of grayish smoke with a big championship-winning, ready-for-the-trophy grin on his face. *Has he really found a time that tops 12:08? A time with more than twenty LED segments? No way.*

I looked at the time on the stereo’s faceplate. *Damn. 10:08. Two plus six plus six plus seven. That’s twenty-one*

*segments. I bet nothing tops that time for number of LED bars. Yep, that fawker [sic] got me!*

Twenty-one little light-emitting diodes, pal. Yes, it's time for you to buy me twenty-one slices of pepperoni pizza. But, not all at once; I'll take it on an installment plan. Three weeks of Italian pie courtesy of my friend who finished in second place in a contest of two." *Damn!*

"Very funny, Frank. Very, very funny. Hardy-har-har-har. Hey, it's not over yet, Frank!"

"Oh, it's very much over, Tryke. In fact, we are driving to the pizza parlor right now." *Oh, jeez. How much money do I have on me? Where's my wallet?!*

I then felt a nudge on my left shoulder.

"Honey, who are you talking to?"



Agent 107 circa 2010



Bonus: **Gold, the short story** (July 2011)

> Note: This 3,000-word short story preceded the 80,000-word, erotically charged, suspense-filled, scheming, highly deceptive, thought-laden, plot-twisting, found-treasure, noiresque (and some other adjectives) odyssey **Gold, a summer story** by about two years. Some of the characters, scenes, and plot in this quick-read beach tale were used in the e-novel. While not part of the psecret psociety pshort pstory pseries, [sic] per se, I thought that I would append this one to give you a taste of the longer coastal saga.

*It was just another trip to the beach until ...*

It all started with a weekend trip to Carolina Beach. Record-breaking heat. A late July weekend. The sun was completely mad in a torrid rage.

Her soon-to-be-ex-husband, Mark, was, too. He trailed her. Susan never noticed the small sedan he rented. However, she almost lost him around Laurinburg, when she stopped for gas. Well, almost. While standing at the gas pump, he watched her as she wondered: *Why did I not fill up the tank in Charlotte?*

Two hours later, and she's finally there. Carolina Beach. Out of the car. Barefoot. But, the beach sand was oh-so-infernally hot. It almost blistered her soles. *This sand is as hot as lava!*

She settles her 30-something, tanned, Native American body on a yellow-and-green beach towel in front of the Marriott. Almost immediately, bugs. An array of flying insects. Mosquitoes. Sand fleas. Horseflies. All biting. Then a gnat alights in her left eye. Totally miserable. *Why did I pick such a hot-ass, insect-infested weekend to come down here?*

Susan goes back to her hotel room. Sweaty. She takes a shower. A cold shower. *Ah, this feels much better. Screw*

*that nasty beach. Scummer [sic] sucks. Why couldn't it be October? I wonder where Mark is. Oh, who the hell cares!*

Mark waited under the bed. (He had slyly slipped into her room when the cleaning lady turned her back.)

After eleven refreshing minutes, Susan exits the shower wrapped in a white bath towel. She sits down on the bed and begins brushing her raven hair. While looking in the mirror above the dresser, she sees Mark's left shoe sticking out from under the bed and almost screams. (Mark does not know that she has noticed him.)

She recomposes herself and gets dressed. And then she runs. Outside. And slams the door. *How the hell did he get in my room? That tricky bastard! That was way too close!*

She makes it safely to the hotel office and reports the intruder/estranged husband. The desk clerk calls the police. A CBPD (Carolina Beach Police Department) officer arrives three minutes later.

The CBPD cop searches her room. Twice. However, her newly estranged hubby is nowhere to be found. *Where the fuck did Mark go?* (He actually jumped off the 3<sup>rd</sup>-floor balcony onto the sand and quickly hobbled to his car, only suffering a sprained ankle.)

Mark, the brown-haired, thirty-something, Caucasian ex-husband-to-be, drives to a small motel on Canal Drive. He parks the car around back and checks in. Once situated in the two-star room, he begins to drink liquor. Vodka on the rocks. At seven o'clock, it's Xanax for dessert. And a half-hour later, he swallows some hydrocodone pills. He starts feeling crazy at eight. Insane thoughts abound in his cranium. *I'm going to find out what she's doing down here,*

*one way or another. Oh, yes; I'm going to win this time, sweetheart. When should I call my lovergirl? Later tonight. Yeah, later tonight.*

The fiery furnace called the sun finally sets. Mark gets in his car and decides that this is the night. Faster and faster. His rage causes him to depress the accelerator pedal to the floorboard. <Crash!>

Back at the Marriott. "I'm glad that we have some time to be together." They, an older Asian American couple, were both saying this. Him and her. Alternately. In the hotel room next to Susan's as the gloaming glommed onto the piney horizon.

The older Asian American couple, Ben and Bao, heard the afternoon door slam. However, they decided not to get involved, thinking it wasn't their business.

After the police cleared her room, Susan finally fell asleep at 7:07 PM. She was frazzled, but even more exhausted. Then a knock on her door at 8:08. She hesitated to get up, but finally did. *Who is it now?*

She walked to the door and looked through the peephole. She saw a cheerful older Asian American couple in exotic (to her) garb. She opened the door.

They said hello to each other. Susan noticed that Bao had a handbag just like hers. *That's mine! How did she get it? What a day!*

"I come to return your handbag, miss," Bao said. "I saw it sitting in the parking lot." *What?!*

Susan accepted it. "Thank you so much."

“Are you alright?” Ben asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I just need to rest. It’s been a long day.”

“Ok, goodnight,” they said in near-unison.

She closed and double-locked the door. Susan even pushed the recliner against it. She suddenly remembered that it was their 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. *Please God, don’t let Mark come back here. Police, please find and arrest him.*

She went into the bathroom. She could hear a conversation in the room behind hers via the HVAC ductwork. Susan put her left ear next to the vent. *Am I really hearing this?*

“Jesus H. Christ, Jane, I just wanted a quiet, relaxing weekend at the beach. Is that too much to ask at my ripe old age?”

“You forgot the Viagra, didn’t you? What fun we will have now. Not!” *He’d forget his dumb head if not for his neck.*

“I’m sorry. Damn, I hate this memory loss. But, I can’t help it.”

“Ah, maybe I can get your old pecker hard. C’mon, get over here, big boy.”

“Who are you on that bed?”

[some female laughter]

“It’s me, Charlie – your goddam wife for the last 48 years! Now, get over here and fuck me like a man.”

“You won’t let go of that pouting mood just yet; now will you, Jane?”

As entertaining as their conversation was, Susan decided to stop eavesdropping. She lay back down on the bed, listening to some Fleetwood Mac on the nightstand radio. She drifted into a twilight sleep and began hearing little audio tidbits in her quasi-dream.

*They are uneasy. | Like that lady next door. | What kind of mischief is she involved in? | He tells her not to worry about it. | Ah, the police will sort it out. | They always do. | Let’s enjoy us! | The need was great. | It had been a stressful three years. | The foreclosure. | The bankruptcy. | The lawyers. | The creeps. | That evil moon. | That eternally restless sea. | Madness nonstop. | An easy life is now gone.*

Then a knock on her door again. She looked at the LED alarm clock on the nightstand. It was 10:09 PM.

Susan struggled to get out of bed. She slowly moseyed over to the door. But, before she could look through the peephole, she heard a deep male voice: “Carolina Beach Police. Anyone in there?”

“Yes, one second, officer.”

She unlocked and opened the door. “What is it officer? Did you catch him?”

“We need to have a word with you, if you don’t mind, ma’am,” the burly, middle-age, white cop said. “Just a few questions down at the station.” *Oh, my God! Why?*

“Oh my, what was happened, officer?”

“We’ll discuss it at the station, ma’am.” *Huh?*

She followed the officer to the CBPD station, just five minutes away. Once there, she took a seat in the tiny interrogation room.

“What is this about?” Susan asked. “How long will I have to be here?” *What a totally screwed-up vacation this has been. All thanks to my adorable a-hole husband.*

“We’ll start in just a moment, miss,” the rookie white officer said as he chomped down on a caramel. “It should only take ten minutes, tops.”

Susan spied what he was eating. “Ah, caramels. C’mon, pass that bag over here, officer. Make this a little more bearable for me.”

A shift of scene. The Carolina Beach McDonald’s the next morning. Tourists had already saturated the place by 8:30.

Down from Michigan, four Caucasian college lads tried to undo their hangovers with strong coffee.

“There are too many loud kids in here,” one of them (Rick) declared.

The screams of finally-at-the-beach kids and cash register tills slamming shut cacophonically [*sic*] intermingled.

“I agree, Rick. Too much noise and commotion. Guys, let’s get out of here. It’s making my hangover much worse.”

One of the hungover foursome picks up a local newspaper and reads the headline to the other three: “Man drowns after car goes off bridge.”

“That’s why the right lane was closed, man!”

“I wonder what led up to that, Ed.”

“Who knows?”

The gang of four departs. Soon they are at the Marriott. They check in. In short order they are poolside. One of them sees a note in the sand and retrieves it.

“What is it, Rick?”

“It’s just a fortune from a cookie, Ed.” *A fortune from a cookie?*

“Well, what does it say, dude?”

“It says, ‘Summer lust is a bust’ ... he-he ... Can you believe that?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, want to throw some football on the beach?”

“Dude, the beach is way too crowded now.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

It is now mid-day by the outdoor hotel pool. The most studious Michigander continued to read the newspaper article. He wondered: *Why did he jump off the bridge? No, he didn’t jump; he was in his car. Oh, it was a vehicle accident. He went off the bridge in his car. But, how? Why? There were no vehicles on the bridge at that time, it says.*

Then all four semi-discuss it, while checking out the bikini-clad girls by the surf.

“Which ones do you think are single?”

“Cool off, Rick.”

“Do you think she is, Matt?”

A 20-something Asian lady walks past the four with a parasol.

“That girl ... you think she’s Vietnamese?”

“No, I think she’s Korean.”

A 7<sup>th</sup> wave washes over a six-year-old’s sand castle. He begins to cry. His mom consoles him.

“Looks like there ... is becoming here,” Ed announces.

The 20-something Asian lady, Saatchi, turns around and walks up to them. She calmly asks, “Did any of you know him?”

“Know whom?” Rick asks.

“Ok, have a nice day, guys,” Saatchi says and walks away.

The four lads were completely dumbfounded.

“Do you know her, Rick?” Ed asked.

“No, not yet.” He chuckles to himself.

“You aint hitting that, dude. Only in your dreams.”



“Did you ever see her before, Ed?”

“No. Never.”

“That strange music. Where is it coming from?”

The four dudes look around, not sure of the sound source.

Backtracking the story again. Saatchi was at that McDonalds's, too, earlier in the morning. In fact, unobserved, right behind the four college lads. She overheard them talking about her new boyfriend. *How could he do it? I bet he was trying to get with Susan, yet again? That weasel dick!*

Saatchi's mind was a million missiles a minute. And they were all making contact. Striking. Exploding. A neural battlefield. *What in the hell happened? My idiot loverboy is now dead. He went off the Snow's Cut Bridge. But, why?! He never even called me.*

Saatchi took a deep breath as she started to walk back to her car. She was going to the police. She couldn't suppress the urge to know more. *Was he still screwing her?*

Saatchi's mind got caught in a vicious loop. And then in leaning columns. Nothing was stacking satisfactorily. She could see his eyes. *How many times did he lie? What was his facial expression when he was fucking her? Well, he's dead now. I should just let it go. I was always going to be the hidden, tucked-away, secret mistress anyway. He was never going to divorce Susan. I know it.*

Suddenly, a tap on her shoulder just before she reached her car. She turned around. It was one of the four collegiate crew: a shirtless Rick.

“Miss, I think you dropped this,” Rick said as he handed her his ‘business’ card.

“Well, that’s some technique, young man.”

“My first attempt. Well, what do you think, ma’am?”

“Maybe if the times were different, Rick.” *What?*

“Every day is different.”

“Is that what they are saying these days on campus?”

“No, just me.”

“Listen, you seem like a sweet guy. Maybe I’ll give you a ring when my life settles down.”

“Ok, but what’s your name?”

“Saatchi.”

Rick watched her get in a red Porsche and drive away. *Man, I’d love to have some Cialis-enhanced sex with her.*

Back to the CBPD interrogation room. Four routine questions. Susan answered truthfully.

“Did you see Mark after he broke into your hotel room?”

“No, I never saw any part of his body after seeing his shoe protruding from under my hotel bed.”

“Were you two still together?”

“Yes, we still lived in the same house in Charlotte.”

“Was Mark addicted to drugs or alcohol?”

“No, not to my knowledge. He did smoke a little weed, though.”

“Was anyone out to get him for any reason?”

“No, not that I was aware of.”

Then the shocker: “Did you know that your husband died in a car accident tonight?”

“No way! Oh, no!” *Holy cow! How? What a cursed vacation.*

The grim reality set in as Susan drove off the CBPD lot. *Where should I go now? Mark is dead. He is really dead. Well, I won't see him under my bed again. I grew to hate him, but I didn't want him to die. Why did he drive off that bridge? None of his tires were blown out. The steering linkages were fine. So strange. And just like Mark.*

And everything kept moving along. A long, gritty, sea-salter [sic] of a day followed. Susan felt the grime on her neck as she walked along the beach beneath an indifferent rising sun. It had been a night of broken, torturous sleep.

Susan then headed back to the hotel and ate a light continental breakfast. She was ready to head back to Charlotte, get Mark buried, and start over.

When Mark's car crashed and flew off the Snow's Cut Bridge, it nearly hit Ned's fishing boat, 55 feet below, just missing it by 20 feet to the aft. A thunderous splash was followed by a five-foot-high wake. It nearly capsized his skiff.

The car windows were down. The Honda sank before anyone could get near it. The driver (Mark) was unconscious. Ned saw his lifeless face go underwater. He made the 911 call.

A pair of emergency-rescue divers extricated Mark's body from the sunken car. Then they placed a buoy where the car sank. It was now too dark to continue operations.

The next day Mark's car was floated to the surface and placed on a barge. Two weeks later it was in a junkyard off US 421. It sat there, untouched, for a month.

Then one late August day, a guy named David, who needed a 2009 Honda Accord trunk walked in. He popped the trunk open to be greeted by 24 gold bars scattered about the interior. He looked around. *Am I on camera?*

David stared at the golden fortune and wondered: *How can I get this gold out of here without being detected? Obviously, no one knows what is in this trunk. Must act fast. Must be smart.* He quietly shut the trunk.

At the junkyard shack-office, he told the older man, Sam, that he would like to buy the totaled Honda for \$5,000. He hoped that Sam would agree to his price, but was ready to go higher.

Sam, a white-haired, Caucasian, 60-ish, one ear-missing junkyard owner, looked at him for a few seconds. He maintained his nonchalant expression as he studied David, a 28-year-old Amerasian techie from the Triangle area.

"You need the whole car, mate?" Sam asked.

“Yeah, it will be worth it to me for the parts over the next 10 years,” David said with minimal enthusiasm. “I drive these Hondas until they die.” *Hope that sounded convincing.*

“Ok, deal,” the oblivious owner replied.

David paid with a credit card for it to be brought to his home, 135 miles away. Sam then had his lone employee, Jed, put it on a flatbed-style wrecker. None of the junkyarders [*sic*] knew what was in the trunk, not even the guard dog.

Over the next few weeks, David melted the gold down and had it recast into little ingots. No control numbers were on it now. He could slowly start to sell it, which he did.

David found a jeweler in Wilmington that didn’t ask too many questions, and gave him \$1,000/ounce. He sold this jeweler one five-pound bar every Monday morning. And like clockwork, he left each Monday at 9:30 AM with a check for \$80,000.

This lucrative routine went on for months. Then one Monday morning in late November, David noticed police cars parked in front of the jewelry store. *Oh, crap!*

He never went back. He couldn’t risk it. And, the jeweler never called him.

Three Mondays later on a gray mid-December afternoon, curiosity got the best of him. He called the jewelry store at 3:33 PM. No answer. All he got was a generic outgoing message. *Is he in jail?*

He hung up the phone. Fearing that the police now had his cell phone number, David packed up the remaining gold bars and headed for Fort Fisher. His mind was loud. *I’ll bury the*

*gold just before sunrise. If the heat comes down on me, I won't have any gold in my possession or on the premises. Whatever you do, David, don't fuck up this once-in-a-lifetime fortune!*

At 4:44 AM, he threw the last shovel load of sand over his golden stash. He even transplanted some sea oats over the burial spot. *Ah, perfecto! No one will ever find it. It looks untouched, and the gold bars are too deep for any metal detector to locate.*

David drove off on the high-tide-softening sand. He would just lie low for a while. He had plenty of loot on hand.

Ah, but he never saw Saatchi smiling behind that tall sand dune.



### **About the Author**

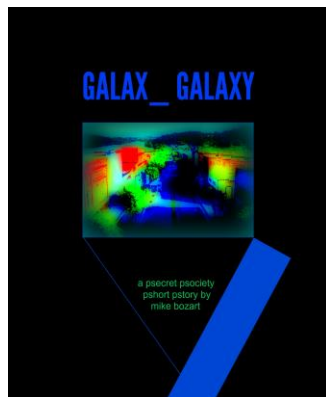
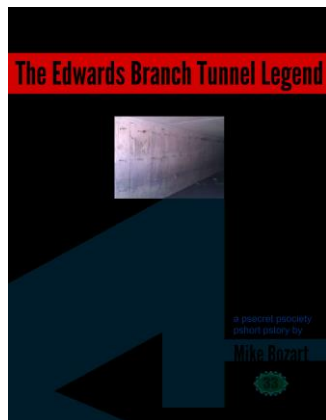
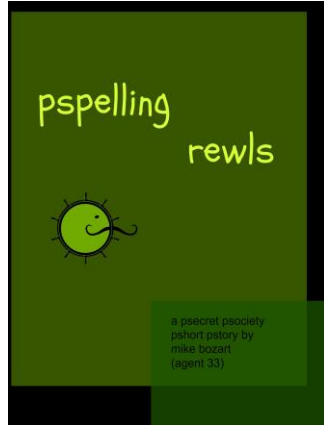
Mike Bozart was born in the tidewater area of Virginia (USA) on a hot, hazy, humid afternoon in July of 1964. He attended a mix of public and Catholic grade schools. After graduating with an Earth Science degree from UNC-Charlotte in 1986, he started doing safety technical writing.

Former residences in North Carolina include Raleigh, Greensboro, Wilmington, Carolina Beach, High Peak (Etowah) and Asheville. Charlotte is his current residence. He has also lived in downtown San Francisco (early '90s).

Mike has now written over fifty quasi-real short stories under the *psecret psociety* heading. *Gold, a summer story*, his first novel – an erotic, suspenseful, noir odyssey – was e-published in 2013. Two novellas followed: *To Morrow Tomorrow* (2014) and *Mysterieu of San Francisco* (2015).

The author is happily remarried with a son.

> Front covers bookmark





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mike bozart  
(agent 33)

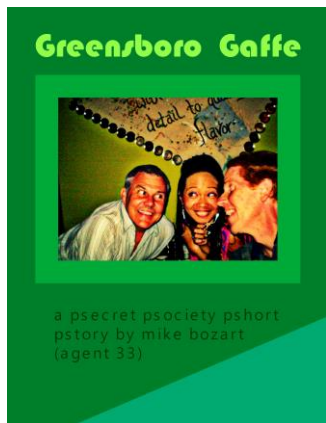
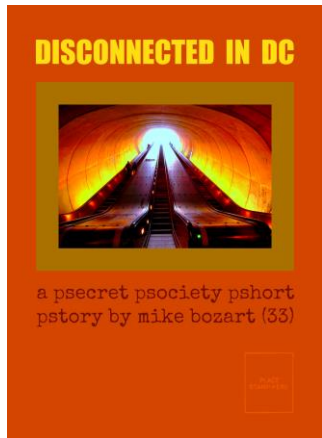


## PLASMA & WIGWOOD

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## NoDa Soda

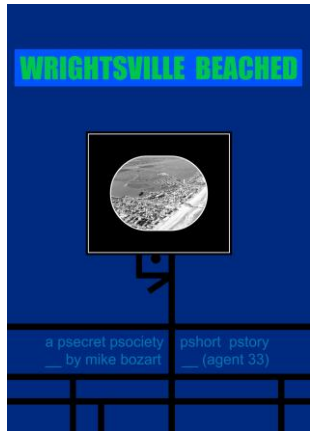


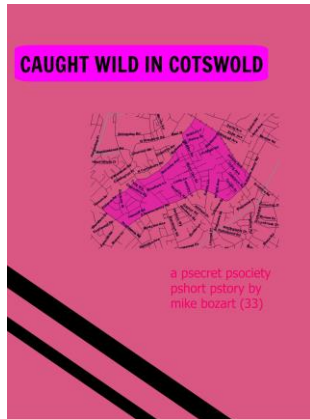
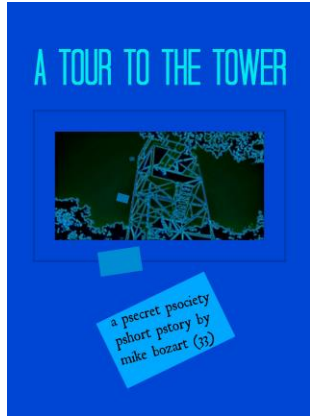
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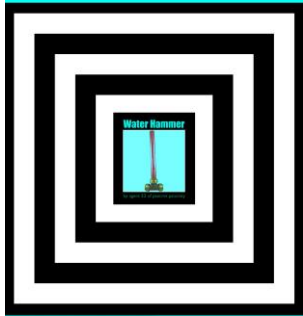


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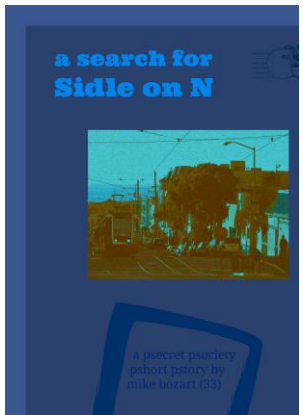




# WATER HAMMER



by mike bozart (agent 33)



## OVERHEARD & OVERHEAD



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mike bozart (33)

## CAROLINA BEACHED



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## WINDMILL WITH A VIEW



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