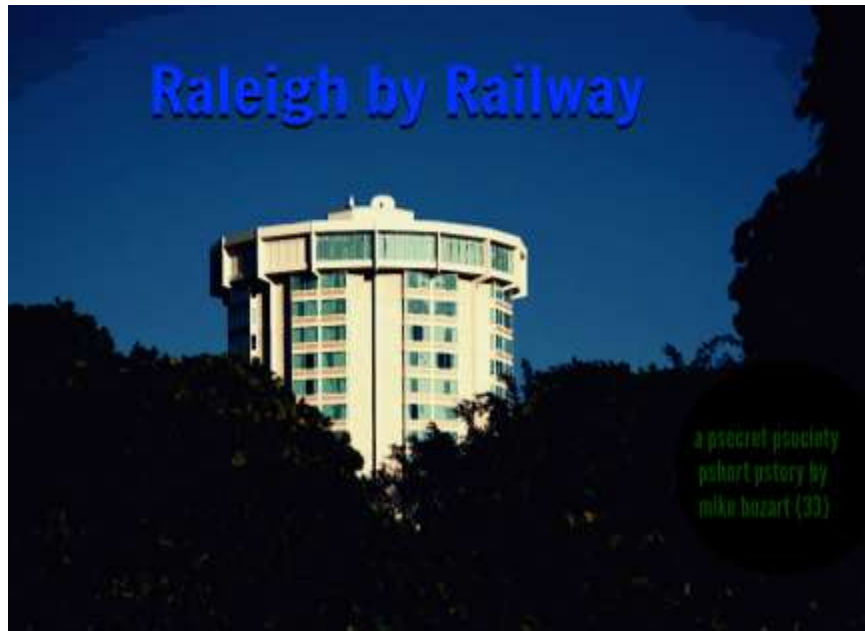


another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Raleigh by Railway by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | NOV 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 several 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 to make.*

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 14th floor. She then handed me the card keys.

“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?*

“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 13th 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 having to do that.”

“But, the 14th floor then is actually the 13th 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 glass vase on my shoeless foot tonight.” *Glass vase? Shoeless foot?*

“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 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 20th 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 17, 32."

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 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 first.”

“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.

The hostess quickly seated us at an east-facing window. 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 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 pinay eyes for a few moments. It was a sublime setting.

"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."

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 the local WRAL news, but only made it to the weather segment. "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 23rd 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.*

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. *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 1st 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 joke. I joined her.

“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. 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 in 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 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 – Liverpool FC 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 52nd 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 backpacks in the chairs.

"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.*