

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



SFO |___| SOFA

by Mike Bozart (Agent 33 of the psecret psociety) |
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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 college 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? Oh, what unabated nonsense goes through my mind.*

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 Colombian roast.

I quickly 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, 'who will remember this 20 years from now?' *I did, but I somehow doubt that she did. Or, did she? Well, who knows? Is she still alive? Oh, I'm sure that she is. She is probably married to a millionaire techie now, living in Palo Alto. She probably has too precocious little brats. Ah, how time ensnares everyone and everything.*

My mind drifted back inside that small studio apartment in the upper Tenderloin district. (This is where the 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 - 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 now. No one asked me to move. Then it dawned on me: *This would be a great place to hide a copy of 'Galax_ Galaxy'. [a recent short story] Yeah, let's do this. We'll leave a copy right here.*

I then surreptitiously placed an 8.5" x 5.5" (22 x 14 cm) 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-inserting freak now!*

However – to my great relief – she was actually scolding an Asian 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 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 perfect!” *Passerelle?* “Well, how was the flight?”

“Long, so very long! The pinay [Filipina in Tagalog and Cebuano] 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 a pressurized aluminum can. My butt hurts just thinking about it. Ugggh.*

“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 at her intoxicating dark brown pinay eyes, and could see all the years she spent in Siquijor (a small island province in the central Philippines). 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 had 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. Hope he’ll be alright.*

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 he 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 cupped 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 an American quarter (2.5 cm). 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.” *Dhay? [Cebuano slang for a Filipina]*

“Is this mis-mint valuable?” *Mis-mint?*

“I’m not sure how much the coin is worth for having that future year stamped on it. But, it is no ordinary coin, 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 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 one-line caption: Full-Body 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?”