

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



The Bunker by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | October 2017

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by Mike Bozart

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Epic Prepperazzi (EP) was an upstart dry-food supplier for preppers (people who believe that a catastrophic disaster or apocalyptic emergency is likely to occur in the near future, and therefore stockpile food, water and goods accordingly). Being a latecomer to the mushrooming hoard-for-survival milieu, the Canadian-American company decided the best way to increase sales and carve out market share was to have a unique, attention-arresting contest. The nondescript online text ad read:

How long could you live alone in a 70° Fahrenheit (21° Celsius) underground bunker in central Colorado with a surfeit of food, drink (including beer/wine) and marijuana, but with NO Internet, NO e-mail, NO phone, NO texts, NO TV, NO radio, and NO clock/watch? We'll pay a special someone \$100 a day. Do you have what it takes? Text YES to EP999 for more info.

Doug, a widowed, childless, retired, healthy, 61-year-old Caucasian Manitoban, had to read it again on his laptop. And then, another four times. He smiled and thought: *This is me! I could do this. I'll finally write that novel before I croak. My experience down there could figure into the plot. I bet that I can go at least a month in that underground flat with no problem. Probably two. An easy \$6K. Or more! For sure. They may have to extract me from that bunker.*

He received the digital prospectus on his smartphone two minutes after texting. Doug mused over the details. *Nice logo. Oh, so the bunker is deep inside a Rocky Mountain. Hmmm ... 700 square feet [65 square meters] of living space. Not bad; bigger than my studio apartment in Toronto. Nice bedroom and bathroom. Decent kitchen. Laundry facilities. A small home theater with over 15,000 film titles, including adult selections. Ah, porno is included. Definitely a male behind this crazy idea. Over 40,000 video-projected e-books are available, including steamy romance novels. Maybe a female is involved, too. Over 80,000 song titles in every genre. Wow! Better have some Ravel and Mussorgsky. Over 2,000 video games. I'd have to be really bored. Though, computer chess might be ok. Or, maybe Go. Wow! That's a nice rowing machine. It even has a 400-foot-long [122 meters] circular track in an old tunnel for walking, running or cycling. Final decision on winning candidate to be made by EP on September 30, 2014. Deadline for entrant forms is September 15th. That's just three days away. If chosen, notification will be made on October 3rd. Must be*

able to begin bunker habitation on Friday, October 10th at noon. There will be media coverage and fanfare. And, last but not least, the hold-harmless agreement – the waiver of the right to sue. Ah, the lawyers probably spent months crafting the language for this bizarre, potentially dangerous, publicity stunt. Should I really sign up for this? Ah, why not? There's no application fee; it's totally free. Anyway, I'm sure that I won't get picked. My age will disqualify me; I bet that they think I'm too old – too much of a health risk – a liability. They're probably looking for an ultra-fit, manic, 30-something survivalist type. Oh well, here goes. One never knows.

It was a chilly, cloudy, forlorn first October (the 3rd) Friday in Winnipeg. Doug was sipping on some tomato-basil soup in his seniors-only apartment when he heard the text alert on his smartphone. He clicked on the message icon. The new text was from EP. *I guess that's the 'thanks for entering, but we chose someone else' text. Oh, well. It was a longshot after all.*

Doug, completely stunned, read the first line aloud:

"We have chosen YOU, Douglas Henry Martinvale!"

He laid the phone down on the table and looked out the window. An American crow zipped by as his breathing stopped for nine seconds. *Wow! I won. I actually got chosen. They picked me. I wonder why. Doesn't matter now. Guess I need to book a flight to Denver. Who should I tell? Only Steven. [his younger brother in Edmonton] No one else. Don't want to be talked out of this.*

Doug arrived at Denver International Airport with just one duffel bag at 2:02 PM on a cool and rainy Thursday, October 9th. He took a hotel shuttle bus to a nearby 3-star 12-story. Once settled in the sixth-floor room, he looked at the gray clouds hovering over the Rockies and thought: *Well, this will be my last night above ground for a while. For how long? Wonder how long I can go. Wonder what the record is for a human living underground. Didn't some woman live in a cavern for four months? Who was she? Where was that?*

The white-haired Canadian then did some research on his smartphone and saw that an Italian lady, Stefania Follini, stayed in a cave in Carlsbad, New Mexico for 130 days in 1989 as part of a circadian rhythm experiment. She fell into a routine of 48-hour wake-sleep cycles. Once back on the

Earth's surface, she thought that she had only been underground for two months. *Gosh, will I lose track of time to that extent? At least the time underground was going by faster than it felt. The reverse would be agonizing.*

After calling room service, Doug's sliced roasted turkey, mashed potatoes and string bean meal arrived 26 minutes later. He ate while watching the evening world news. *My last normal dinner for a long, long time. Savor every bite. It won't taste like this in the bunker. Get ready for powder-and-water gruel. Oh, the culinary joys that await. Not! Ah, maybe it won't be so bad. Might even get used to it. Maybe.*

The middle-aged Caucasian American news anchor then said that Thomas Eric Duncan, the first person diagnosed with Ebola in the United States, had died the day before. *Well, no Ebola down in the bunker. A great place to avoid viruses altogether and remain disease-free. What if a deadly plague swept across North America while I was down there. Yikes! What a terrifying thought! The effects of reading way too much science fiction.*

Doug soon felt drowsy. He lay down on the bed and fell asleep within ten minutes. The air travel, even though not a very long flight, had taken it out of him; he was spent.

The next morning he awoke at 6:36 AM and jumped into the shower. After eating a light breakfast in the lobby, he walked out the door. The black limousine was already there. He got in the back seat with his sole piece of luggage.

"So, are you ready to go down in the hole?" the late-40-ish African American driver asked. *Down in the hole? So, he already knows about it. Who told him? Someone from EP, I guess. They've already started the PR [public relations] machine. They just couldn't wait.*

"I guess so," Doug said. "If not now, when? I'm at the perfect phase of my life to do something like this." *The crazy phase.*

The drive to Silverthorne took 91 minutes. It was largely sans conversation. Doug had grown pensive. He noticed that there was already snow on the upper slopes of the mountains. *Will I ever see these mountains again? Am I going to die down there? Is this where it ends for me? Why such grim thoughts?*

After a 22-minute photo-op, replete with handshakes and a series of short – though quite bombastic – EP speeches, Doug boarded an elevator that went 620 feet (189 meters) down into a mountain. *Well, this is it. Hope I don't crack up.*

Twenty-seven seconds later, a now-not-so-optimistic Doug; a very-much-ebullient Marcus Q. Weizenstien, the 55-and-still-quite-suave president of EP; and an-almost-deadpan Juan Lopez, a 37-year-old, pencil-mustached, Latino security guard, stepped off the elevator into a concrete-walled corridor. Forty-nine feet (15 meters) farther, the sparsely lamped, slab-quiet, curving, industrial-looking hallway was interrupted by a steel door on the inner wall. *This must be the front door to my new apartment for the indefinite future. I bet that it's the only door: one way in – and one way out.*

Juan unlocked the massive metal door with one of a dozen silver keys on his belt-tethered ring. He then pulled the door open to reveal a very ordinary foyer with a 7'-9" (2.36 meter) ceiling. The recessed overhead light was on. It was indeed at room temperature inside, some seven degrees Fahrenheit (four degrees Celsius) warmer than the corridor. *Not bad. I can do this. I can live here.*

The three of them began to tour the furnished bunker. Once in the kitchen, Marcus stopped and pointed at the stove.

"It's an all-electric Medallion Home," the EP president proclaimed with a charitable chuckle. "You are old enough to remember those heavy, little, round, gold-and-black plaques, too, Doug. It's ok; it's safe to admit it down here." He laughed again and then recomposed. "Our safety consultant said – well, he actually screamed, 'No natural gas, no propane – way too dangerous – too much of a fire hazard.' And, I agreed with him. No, we don't want our intrepid Canadian guest to become a charred subterranean marshmallow. By the way, there are fire extinguishers in every room. There's also a hose under this sink that you can connect to the threaded faucet." *Yeah, an out-of-control fire down here would suck ... infernally.*

"So, no candles or matches?" Doug asked, anticipating the likely negatory answer.

"Nope, and no lighters and no smoking," Marcus stated emphatically. "If a smoke detector goes off and we find out

that it was from smoking, you'll get yanked out and forfeit all of your earnings. If you're wondering about the weed, it's under the coffee table with a vaporizer. Vaping is ok. Just pace yourself." *I bet that he's a pothead. [habitual marijuana smoker] He probably moved to Colorado just for the lax marijuana laws.*

"Ok, I'm not really a pot smoker, but after a week I may be taking a puff," Doug said and then laughed bashfully.

No reaction from Marcus. Juan just smiled.

"Are you a drinker, Mr. Martinvale?" Marcus asked with a raised-higher right eyebrow. *Hope this old sod isn't a fish.*

"Light to moderate," Doug answered. "Hope I don't become a full-blown alcoholic down here." *But with not much to do, and all day and night to do it, who knows? Hope that I can commence, continue, and complete that novel. I'll start it off like my situation: an older guy living underground, completely oblivious to the surface world. It may just write itself.*

"We certainly hope not, too," Marcus added. "Once again, just pace yourself." *That must be their mantra: Just pace yourself. Just place yourself. Just replace yourself.*

"I will. So, where's that great-tasting Epic Prepperazzi food stashed?" Doug asked. *Great tasting? He's pulling my leg.*

"Right around this corner, kind sir," Marcus matter-of-factly answered. "Five bins of freeze-dried and millstone-pulverized carbs, sugars, vitamins, minerals, protein, amino acids and some unsaturated fats – just a little. Each one of these powder bins is twenty feet [six meters] tall; one for each taste: salty, sweet, sour, bitter and umami. Dispense and mix as you like. Be creative. Experiment with the proportions and consistency. Find your form factor." *Find your form factor? Too much. Must suppress the urge to guffaw.*

"Well, I'm no chef, Mr. Weizenstien." *Especially with powders.*

"Oh, I'm sure that you'll come up with a winning taste, Doug." *Yeah, right.*

"So, there's even umami," Doug repeated.

“Quite savory of us, huh?” the president proudly replied with another self-satisfied chuckle.

“Say, how many total calories are locked-up in there?” Doug inquired. *With a total calorie count, I could calculate how many days I could stay down here.*

“Ah, now wouldn’t you like to know? Already thinking of beating the underground, living-in-isolation record, Doug? Just a rhetorical question. No need to answer. You know, I like you already, Mr. Martinvale. I’m going to let you in on a little secret: I cast the tie-breaking vote for you. Yep, I sure did. I just didn’t trust that one-time hacker, that super-tech-savvy millennial. I could see him establishing a prohibited link to the surface world. We old dogs need to look out for each other. Don’t you think so, Doug?” *Wow! Was it really a tie? I think he’s just blowing smoke up my ass.*

“Why, certainly. And, thank you so much, Marcus. Can I call you Marcus?”

“Hell, you can call me Al. Remember the Paul Simon tune?” *He’s a bit nutty. One too many bong hits. [inhalations of marijuana smoke from a water pipe]*

The tour continued to the small bathroom, which had a tub-shower combination.

“You’ll never run out of fresh, clean, bacteria-free Rocky Mountain water, Doug,” Marcus attested. “It comes down from an internal spring in this mountain, and is stored in a 350-gallon [1,325 liters] tank just above us. The spring’s flow rate has never fallen below a half-gallon [1.9 liters] a minute, even in the driest of times.” *So, an endless supply of water. Very nice.*

“That’s good to know,” Doug said as he looked at the white porcelain toilet. *Well, there’s my new epic crapperazzo. [sic]*

Marcus noticed Doug’s gaze. “As for waste water, it all goes down into the bowels of this mountain. There’s enough capacity in this natural septic tank to last for a thousand years. As for trash, you just place it in the compactor in the hallway. It then drops down a chute into a sealed-off basement holding area. Once again, there’s plenty of excess capacity; you wouldn’t fill it up in 50 years.” *Well, that covers my lifespan. I know that I won’t live to be 111.*

The trio then made their way to the bedroom. The double bed already had linens on it. *Hope the mattress isn't too soft.*

Marcus continued. "You've got an over-under washer-dryer combination in that closet with enough detergent for at least 5,000 loads. Assuming two loads per week, enough suds for 50 years." *Hmmm ... Will others live down here after me? Sure seems like it. Am I really the first?*

The procession then stepped into the small home-theater room. *Ah, this is where I'll mostly be.*

"No shortage of movies, tunes and games," Marcus barked. "Our number cruncher added up the total time of all the entertainment. You'd have to live to be 203 to see and hear them all, assuming something was playing all the time and you never slept." *I could write factually critical reviews on every paranormal movie that I watch down here. Maybe call my series: 'The Debunker in the Bunker'. Post them all online when I get out. My own website. Well, maybe. We shall see.*

"How many cameras?" Doug asked out of utmost curiosity.

"Just one above the stove," Marcus informed as they marched back into the tiny kitchen. "Relax! We're not Epic Voyeurazzi, Doug! This isn't some spy-cam deal. You're free to run around naked down here, if that suits you. The only thing that you must do is check in at the camera on the range hood whenever you see the little red light flashing next to the tiny lens and mini-mic. We just want to make sure that you're doing ok." *They just want to make sure that I haven't bought the farm or cracked-up and gone 'Looney Tunes'.*

"Ok, no problem," Doug consented.

"Well, I believe that wraps it up," Marcus said, now seeming anxious to leave. "Oh, rest assured that the air quality is constantly monitored, and will be kept at an oxygen level of 21% with a relative humidity of 42%. Now, any questions?"

"Uh, no, I think I'm good to go," Doug replied. "Or stay, I mean." Doug let out an awkward half-laugh.

"Very good," Marcus chirped. "All the best, Doug. Set a record for Canada." *Why would he say that?*

Marcus shook Doug's hand and then he and Juan walked toward the door. They then stopped. Marcus held his right

hand up. Juan gave a subtle grin. Then the duo exited and the door closed. *And now it begins.*

Doug looked at the closed, vault-like door. *I wonder if it's locked. Maybe better if it is. Give them five minutes to be clear of here, and then check.*

After what Doug assumed was 300 seconds, he walked over to the black door. To his supreme surprise, it was not locked. He opened it and looked at the vacant corridor. Then he stepped back inside his new abode and shut the door. Doug saw a lever. He pressed it down. A deadbolt extended into a mortice. *Ah, so the door can only be locked from the inside – since I don't have the key. Safety must have demanded this.*

The first day went easier than Doug imagined. Though, the food was a challenge. After two craft beers, he saw the red light flashing in the kitchen. He checked in with someone named Dave of the EP staff. Apparently, the small speaker was behind the hood's vent. After the cursory chat was over, Doug went to the bedroom at what he thought was 10:00 PM (but was really 11:11 PM local time) and quickly nodded off.

Doug awoke at what he assumed was about 6:15 AM (really 7:49 AM). He decided to just watch movies all day to meter the time. After breakfast, he watched an old film noir and then a 1990s spy flick. After a mushy lunch, he watched a documentary on tunneling. Then Doug opted for a pornographic video compilation. He found the sex toys in the cabinet below the 60" (152 cm) flat-screen TV. *Marcus and company thought of everything. Living down here aint that bad. A newfound sinecure. Another \$100. Cha-ching.*

The next morning (actually the afternoon), Doug indulged in some marijuana. It was premium grade. He decided to start his novel while he was quite high. After three mind-meandering hours on the internet-neutered laptop, he had one paragraph:

An older ordinary man. An older ordinary man who was seeking clues. An older ordinary man, who was seeking clues, while trapped underground. An older ordinary man, who was seeking clues, while trapped underground with an inexhaustible supply of good air, tolerable food and clean water. 'What could possibly go wrong?' Timothy wondered aloud as the refrigerator compressor kicked on. 'And, what could possibly go right?'

On what Doug believed was the morning of day 5 (actually late evening), he went outside to jog around the circular

track inside the HVAC-ductwork-overhead service tunnel. Halfway around he came to a door that looked like his. *Is this another bunker? Am I not alone down here? Should I see if the door is unlocked? What if I open it and someone is standing right there?! Maybe just put my ear to it first. Yeah, that's it.*

Doug quietly walked up to the door, cupped his right hand, placed it to the door, and listened intently. There was no sound. *Ah, no one home. I always assume the improbable. That's why I'm 61 with no real property or savings to speak of. Should I try to open the door for a quick look-see? No, let's leave well enough alone. Entering might set off an alarm and get me tossed. I want to rack up a tidy sum of loot down here. Don't want to fuck this up. Let's just move along.*

The virtual days went by. Not unpleasantly. Doug's novel gained momentum. The mild-mannered Manitoban felt that his story had some traction after 41 pages, which was how far along he was on the 13th actual day (which he thought was day 12).

Doug would slyly ask – in a roundabout way – for the date at check-in, but never was a mote of a hint relinquished. He once asked Dave if he was going to a Halloween party, but the staffer's answer was ambiguous. Moreover, Doug remained unsure of the exact date, and began to wonder about his sense of time. *Has Halloween already passed? No way.*

And then on what he thought was day 22 (actually day 24), Doug heard something fall outside in the corridor. He opened his door to find an aluminum pipe-insulation band on the smooth concrete floor. It had snapped off. *Did that steam pipe get too hot and expand? Is the HVAC system still working properly? The temperature in my bunker seems fine. Oh, it's probably no big deal. Just gather it up and put it aside. Just don't want to step on it if out here in flip-flops.*

Doug became engrossed in his novel-writing endeavor. He stayed inside for the next six days. Then on day 31 (which Doug thought was day 28), he ventured outside to do some running. The insulation band that he had placed against the wall had been moved slightly. *Ah, there must be rodents down here. Definitely need to keep the door shut and locked.*

Doug would do fifteen laps (6,000 feet; 1829 meters) at a moderate pace. Then he moseyed over to his door. He pulled on the handle. It was locked. *What the hell?! I can't lock this door once I leave. It can only be locked from the inside. Did it somehow lock itself? Or, is someone else down here? Did they slip into my bunker while I was running?*

He looked down the curving hallway. Then Doug took off running. He stopped at the other door. His left hand pushed down on the handle. The door was not locked. Doug cautiously pulled the door open to see a bunker almost identical to his. *Woah!*

Doug stepped inside and locked the door. It was dead quiet. The kitchen light was on. *So, there was someone in here. And now, they're in my bunker. Does EP know about this? I'm sure. This must be a wrinkle in their experiment. 'How will Doug react?' That's what they want to see. Maybe this bunker has cameras. Does it have a check-in station above the range?*

With certain expectation, Doug walked over to the electric stove. But, there was no camera, microphone or red light on the range hood. However, there was a note on the countertop.

Just thought it was time for a switch, partner. I've been down here for nine weeks. I am/was an EP employee (the guinea pig). The company is a scam. My food is already getting moldy. The president is insane. He's not letting us out. He is telling everyone on the surface world that you are loving your time down here and never want to leave this underground 'nirvana', and that the EP food has sharpened your mental faculties. Just last week (before I had my secret connection discovered and severed), he said that you were inventing new problem-solving methods for 'underground issues'. I know that your bunker has a connection to

company staff. I'm going to try to play some head games with them. Need to get them to reactivate the elevator for us. Maybe I'll have some success. I'm going to tell them the truth: The food sucks and is going to hell fast. Well, keep your fingers crossed. I'll knock three times. Thanks, Marvin

Doug then checked out the powder in the bins. All of the flavors looked ok, except for the umami one. There were some tiny green specks in it. *Is that really mold? Almost looks like the laundry detergent. Well, let's not eat any of this one.*

Doug laid his old frame down on the bed that was essentially the same as his. The linens were clean and fresh. He finally fell asleep after wondering about the next day for two hours.

The waking hours went by with no triple-knock on the door. In fact, there was no detectable sound of any kind outside. After what he felt was nine hours (actually eleven), Doug opened the door and ventured into the corridor. It was dead quiet. He paused. *Should I bring some kind of weapon? Wouldn't that be wise? I have no idea who this 'Marvin' cat is. Still unsure of his veracity – not convinced that that was mold in his umami bin. The guy is up to something. Maybe something nefarious. Must stay on-guard. Must prepare for the worst case scenario: an attack.*

Doug retrieved a long-tined fork and walked towards his original bunker. He soon saw a vertical line of light; the door was cracked open. *Now, what? How to approach?*

Small silent steps. Stopping just before the threshold, Doug threw the door wide open and yelled: "Hello! Anybody home? Marvin, it's me, Doug."

There was no reply. There was no sound at all.

Doug über-cautiously checked his bunker apartment, going from room to room SWAT style. It was all clear of humans. He sighed. *What a relief!*

To the door he sprinted. He locked it. Then he popped open a craft beer (a Boulder porter) and sat down. He switched on

his laptop and opened his story in Word. Doug was shocked to see a paragraph tacked onto his text.

And then, the air got progressively worse. The oxygen level began to drop while the carbon dioxide concentration increased. Marvin figured that his only chance was the elevator shaft – the last resort for escape.

Doug hurried to the elevator. The silver doors were partially open. He squeezed into the gap and saw a 40-something, stocky, brown-haired, Caucasian male lying facedown in the bottom of the pit.

“Are you ok?” Doug shouted.

Marvin groaned. *He’s alive.*

Doug utilized the wall-mounted ladder to enter the 11.5-foot-deep (3.5 meters), cube-shaped well. He grabbed Marvin’s right shoulder and turned him over. There was a nasty gash on his forehead. Blood was all over his face. Upon closer examination, it appeared that his skull was fractured. *Oh, dear! This aint good. Not at all. Wonder how it happened. Did he fall while trying to climb the elevator shaft?*

“Save yourself,” Marvin uttered. “Exit now!” he gasped with his final breath. Then he lost consciousness ... and died. *Holy cow! He’s dead.*

Suddenly there was a whirring mechanical noise above. The elevator car was rapidly descending. Faster. It was now plummeting 33 feet (10 meters) every second. *I bet this elevator hit Marvin in the head. Maybe there’s a sensor down here that activates the elevator to prevent escape. Must get out of here now.*

Doug’s left shoe slipped on the fifth rung. He panicked and then restarted climbing. However, he had lost critical seconds on his egress. *Must hurry! Oh, no!*

His torso would be cut in half.