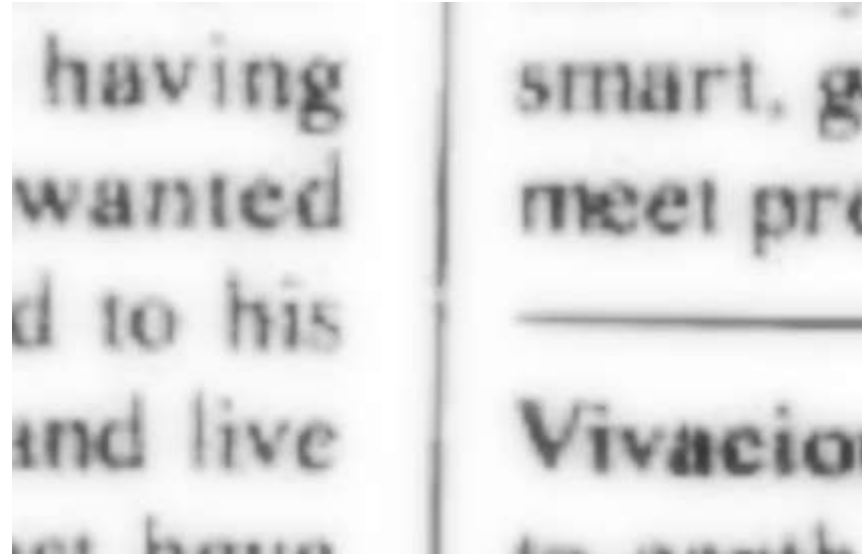


**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



**The Classified Ad** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | MAY 2017

**The Classified Ad**

by Mike Bozart

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December 1986. I was 22 and living alone in an older but by no means historic, though recently renovated, one-bedroom apartment at 235 Maryland Avenue (now razed). It was just south of the old Sunset Park neighborhood (a dicey area at the time) in Wilmington (NC, USA). I had been living there for several months. After getting settled in, I was ready to take a trip to somewhere new. When I saw the Piedmont Airlines ad in the local newspaper with discounted airfares to the West Coast, I jumped at it. A day later I had my tickets. I was now all set for my first visit to San Francisco (CA, USA).

On Tuesday morning, the 30<sup>th</sup> – the eve of New Year's Eve – I flew from ILM (Wilmington) to CLT (Charlotte) to SFO (San Francisco). I had a whopping \$105 in my wallet for the three days and nights in the city by the bay. And, not a single credit card. Yes, I was astoundingly naïve and quite foolish.

At 3:13 PST the Boeing 737 landed on a wet asphalt runway. Twenty-seven minutes later, I emerged from the lower level domestic arrival area. Assorted motor vehicles were scurrying and splashing about. I had a dull headache (later diagnosed to be related to aqueductal stenosis). It was raining, cold, and already almost dark. With an occluded mind, I considered my transportation options. *Hmmm ... Where is that darn MUNI bus stop? Hey, there's a taxi! No, can't take a cab – that would eat up half of the money. Would love to just lie down somewhere and pop some aspirin.*

Then I saw a green van for a lower-tier hotel stopped at the concrete median. My line of thinking suddenly changed. *That's a free shuttle to a nearby budget hotel. Why not just 'splurge' the first night? Yeah, let's. Probably get a free breakfast, too. Then go ultra-cheap the next two nights. Maybe stay in a hostel downtown.*

I walked up to the van. The front door was open. *Here goes.*

"Any vacancies at the hotel?" I asked the late-50-ish, rotund, African American driver.

"Plenty of rooms available, sir," he kindly answered.

"How much is the rate?" I queried.

"The cheapest room with taxes is \$48.48 tonight, sir. That includes a complimentary continental breakfast." *That's*

*almost half of my loot. But, a warm, dry room with a clean bed sure would be nice right about now.*

“Ok, you sold me.” I promptly stepped into the van and took a seat in the back. There were only three travelers inside, all having dense, opaque, rainy-day thoughts. *Did I leave the stove on?*

After checking in at this frugal name-forgotten Burlingame inn, I flopped down on the queen-size bed and slept for three hours. Around eight o'clock I walked over to a convenience store and bought a jug of tea and a frozen pizza. I paid the Arab-looking man \$4.52. *Ok, the first day here has cost exactly \$53. Only fifty-two dollars left. Must go much cheaper the next two. Have already blown over half of my wad o' cash.*

The raindrops slowed on the window pane as I ate the cardboard-crust microwaved pizza. After watching the ten o'clock news, I was lights-out.

A nightmare soon engulfed me. I was completely broke with 24 hours to go. It felt so real. Too real. *Prescient?*

Early the next morning after a nice hot shower, I indulged – or overindulged – at the free breakfast bar in the lobby. I must have consumed over 2,500 calories in carbs and sugars. I was completely refueled now.

At noon I checked out of the hotel and moseyed over to Max's Restaurant on Old Bayshore Highway. I just had ice water and a baked potato with butter and Worcestershire sauce (still a cheap favorite). Yes, I was living it up on the peninsula. Another high roller. Ok, maybe not. Even close.

Well, the middle-aged, brown-haired Caucasian waitress was quite convivial. She told me that she had seen a lot of change in sleepy Burlingame over the past decade. Despite my bill coming to a grand total of \$1.93, I left her a \$2 tip. *Forty-eight dollars and seven cents left to cover forty-three hours and sixteen minutes. What does that come out to per hour? [\$1.11] A little over a dollar an hour. Got to be super-thrifty from here on out.*

As I sipped my water, I considered transportation options to downtown San Francisco. *A taxi? Nope. Even more expensive from here. The bus? Doubt there is a MUNI stop*

*in Burlingame. Oh, let's just go for it. Add a slice of risk. Live a little, sport. Write about it later. Well, if we don't die.*

At 1:11 PM my left thumb was getting wet. Yes, I was hitchhiking in a downpour in my lurid, highlighter-green, hooded K-Mart raincoat at the US 101 freeway entrance ramp. And, boy was it ever chilly. It was a damp coldness that reached the phalanges. *How long until I get a ride? Will it be some homicidal nut-job? Or, will the local cops pick me up? Another red-haired freak trying to get to Frisco. Book him, Danno.*

To my astonishment, a tan sedan pulled up just four minutes later. The passenger-side window lowered. The driver was a 60-ish, white-haired, beret-topped Caucasian man in a royal-blue jogging suit. *Is he some old lech cruising for a twink? Hope not.*

"Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Downtown," I replied.

"Ok, get in," he implored.

We made small talk as he motored north on the Bayshore Freeway (US 101). The rain ceased as we paralleled the bay, but the skies remained decidedly overcast. It turned out that Gary was an apartment landlord heading to Market Street for a lease signing. I told him that I was on a limited budget, seeking ultra-cheap lodging. Thus, he dropped me off in front of the old YMCA Hotel on Turk Street. I thanked him profusely. Gary wished me well before driving off into the gray mist. *That sure was nice of him. A free ride with no hassle. Serendipity, don't run away.*

I checked in at the turn-of-the-century-appearing front desk. I got two nights for a total of \$22.50. I suspected that the 30-something Caucasian lady reduced the rate for me. Maybe she could sense my forlornness. *Another lucky break.*

Over to the old-style elevator I marched. Upward the brass-trimmed car clanked. *Hope the cable doesn't snap. Or, an earthquake strike.*

Room 601 had a little desk, an ancient dresser and a well-worn single bed, which I sat down upon. *Excellent. Shelter is now taken care of for the remainder of the trip. Let's see ... I now have \$25.57 for food and drink for a day and a half.*

*Well, no more restaurants. Just hit a convenience store. Or better, hit a grocery store. So much cheaper. Need bus fare back to SFO on Friday morning. Must not drop below two dollars.*

I took an hour-long nap on the slightly lumpy bed. When I awoke my window was completely gray: The fog at 3:03 PM was incredibly dense; I couldn't even see the buildings across the street. *There's your classic pea-soup San Francisco fog. Such a strange town with weird weather. Would love to live here. Well, maybe someday. [I would live there for nine months in 1992.]*

My headache was long gone, but I now had a persistent cough. I hocked up a big green oyster. And then another. And another. *Oh, jeez ... Do I have walking pneumonia? Need to get groceries before it gets dark and rainy. Would be nice to check out Golden Gate Park, too. Maybe ask for directions.*

The desk clerk informed me that I could pick up the (route) 5 on McAllister Street. The bus stop was only two and a half blocks away.

Soon I was headed west on a MUNI electro-bus. At 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, I got off and took a muddy path over to an eerily serene Spreckels Lake. Then I wandered by the bison-less paddock to North Lake. And then, yet another squall moved in from the Pacific Ocean. *So much for this hike.*

I took another footpath from Chain of Lakes Drive to 47<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and was soon back on Fulton Street. The raw rain was arriving in sheets as I walked west on the multi-pooled sidewalk. In two blocks I was at La Playa. *Yey! There it is – Safeway. Just as she said.*

Inside the grocery store I briskly went. I bought a loaf of dill-rye bread, three tins of sardines and a half-gallon of tea. The total: \$7.57. *The bus ate a dollar and will eat another one going back. Will have \$16 left.*

While waiting at the bus stop at Cabrillo Street, my coughing worsened. I was spitting out green mucus left and right. Luckily, I was alone under the shelter. As I looked at the plastic seats, I noticed a free weekly publication that had been left for dead. Just as the bus arrived, I grabbed the discarded *SF Netherground* copy. *Reading material for the ride back. Wonder what the personal ads are like in this rag.*

I took a middle seat and flipped to the classified ads at the back of the thin 16-page newsprint periodical. There were the usual categories. Stuff for sale, including a real Mellotron. Services available – lots of exotic massage ads. And of course, the personals. Under the ‘Women seeking Men’ rubric was an intriguing four-liner:

SAF, 21, seeking SWM for a rarest reality.  
Unconventional lifestyle. No TV. No radio.  
Income is not an issue. Questionnaire first.  
Describe yourself in four words. [Box 241]

I read it again. And again. Well, I couldn’t stop reading it. *Wow! Too bad I don’t live out here. It would be worth it just to meet this chick.*

The bus stopped for a red light at Stanyan Street. The rain had now subsided, but darkness had moved in. A reflective-taped young Asian woman was jogging through the crosswalk. *Is that her? Ha! Boy, you really need to settle your mind down.*

I exited the bus on Market Street about 15 minutes later. My eyes immediately started to scan the dark, wet, gray sidewalks. And there it was at Golden Gate Avenue and Taylor Street: a payphone. And, even better – an available payphone. *Just want to hear her voice. I can afford it. Already have food, drink and shelter covered.*

I deposited 35 cents into the vertical slot. Two seconds later I heard a dial tone. *Good. This phone isn’t broken.*

My right index finger depressed the 11 digits. I heard a recording that prompted a box number. I had memorized it.

Two seconds later I heard a young Asian lady’s voice: “Please do what the ad stated. Thank you. Chanda.” *Huh? That’s it?*

And then, I heard a beep. *Ok, that’s the cue. Talk now, fool.*

“Hello Chanda. My name is Mike. Tomorrow is open for me if you want to conduct your questionnaire over coffee somewhere in downtown. I’m staying at the YMCA Hotel.

Not sure what the phone number is. Ok, describe myself in four words: Not here for long.” *Well, it’s the truth.*

I placed the black plastic handset back in the U-shaped chrome cradle. *Well, I did it. Won’t ever hear from her I bet. But, I heard her soft voice. Wonder what she looks like. She sounded like she is petite.*

Back to the YMCA Hotel I trudged. There were some neo-hippie New Year’s Eve revelers in the lobby. They were all getting ready to go somewhere.

“Where are you guys off to?” I asked the goateed, long-blonde-hair-in-a-ponytail dude in his mid-20s.

“Oakland, man,” he replied with a stoned-out-of-his-gourd expression. “The [Grateful] Dead are playing again at Kaiser [Convention Center] tonight. BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] goes right there – Lake Merritt Station. You going?”

“No. I think that I may have walking pneumonia. But, you guys have fun.”

“Ok, we’ll spark one up for you at intermission.”

I chuckled. “Ok, thanks.”

The straggly, tie-dyed octet then shipped out. I went back to my room. The sardines on rye weren’t that bad.

I coughed and sputtered myself to sleep. The only dream that I recalled in the morning was that of a young Asian lady waving goodbye to me from the edge of a jungle cliff. I awoke just before hitting the ground. *Whe w! Those caraway seeds are strong.* Internal chuckle.

Around nine o’clock I went down to the lobby for a free cup of coffee. It was vacant, save for a white guy of about 50 years who was holding his half-bald head. *He’s probably hungover. His new year arrived with a thud. And is still thudding.*

As I was passing by the front desk, the female clerk looked at me.

“Mr. Bozart, you have a message.” She then extended her left hand which was holding a small pink envelope.

I took it from her. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Happy New Year! Hope '87 is better than '86.”

“Likewise,” I replied as I headed for the elevator. *Wonder what this is. Let's keep the suspense going; read it back in the room.*

I unlocked the old deadbolt and sat down at the desk. I opened the envelope with my penknife and retracted the bifolded lavender pastel note. I silently mouthed:

*I will be in the back corner of the coffee shop at Golden Gate & Larkin at 11:00 AM with the questionnaire. - Chanda*

Disbelief consumed my psyche. *Wow! Guess I should take a shower and get presentable. Never expected this. I can afford two coffees. Hope she doesn't want anything else.*

At 10:47 I left my hotel room. It was mostly cloudy, but it wasn't raining as I walked down Hyde Street. I then turned right onto Golden Gate Avenue. In just a block I was looking across the street at the coffeehouse. *That was quick. Should I go in now? I'm probably five minutes early. She may not be there yet. Maybe wait three minutes.*

I watched the traffic lights cycle once more, and then I crossed the street. The java joint's aluminum-framed glass door opened easily. I peered to the back. And, there she was – an elfin, red-sweatered Asian lass in the rearmost corner.

Towards her I drifted. Chanda then looked up and waved. She was attractive, but not in the classic sense. I took a seat across from her in the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -of-a-circle brown booth. She already had the questionnaire in front of her.

“You must be Mike,” she plainly stated. *What is her story?*

“Yes, and you must be Chanda.” *Of course.*



“Indeed, I am.” *She’s cute.*

“Where are you from, if I may ask?” *He’s inquisitive.*

“Cambodia. Just outside of Phnom Penh, the capital.” *My Laos guess was close.*

“Oh, nice.” *Has he been there?*

“Do you know any Khmer?” [the language of Cambodia]

“I’m afraid I don’t.” *He’s never been to Cambodia.*

“I won’t hold it against you this time.” She then giggled strangely. *She’s an odd one – an enticingly odd one.*

“Thanks.” I smiled.

“Well, are you ready for the nine questions?” *Only nine? Good. This should be easy.*

“Sure. Only eight to go now, right?” *Huh?*

“Ah, you are a sly one.” She waved her left index finger. “Question one: Could you live your life as an experiment?” *What?!*

“Well, I guess that it would depend on whom else was in the test tube with me.” *Not bad.*

“Question two: How much external stimulation do you require?” *Where is this going?*

“Not that much. My mind constantly amuses me.” *Good answer.*

“Question three: How do you rate your imagination?”

“Fairly high if I may answer honestly.” *If? Hmmm ...*

“Question four: What would you think about a couple living in isolation from the modern world?” *Primitive. Is she recruiting for some off-the-grid cult?*

“With the right person, it might be just fine.” *Might?*

“Question five: Do you want to be famous for something extremely unique?” *Like making morons vanish?*

“Sure, why not? As long as no one is getting violated or injured.” *Ok, that was a decent answer.*

“Question six: Would you agree that two people will always get bored with each other over time?” *She’s probing.*

“Um, no, not necessarily.” *Hmmm ... He stuttered.*

“Question seven: Would you consent to having a year of your life being recorded and documented?” *Is this some new art-form? I bet she’s an art student. Or, maybe a psychology student at SFSU. [San Francisco State University]*

“Depends on the end product.” *Fair answer.*

“Question eight: Could you live on a tiny island with someone like me?” *Ok, now she cuts to the chase.*

“Sure. You’re not a headhunter, are you?” *He’s a bit paranoid.*

“Question nine: Can humans transcend their evolutionary biology?” *Woah! What does she have in mind?*

“Let’s find out together.” *Nice brash answer.*

“Ok, that’s it. All done. Not that painful, was it?”

“Not at all. Is phase two on Phnom Aural?” [Cambodia’s tallest peak] *He knows?!*

“I’ll be getting back in touch with you. What is your mailing address?”

“I’ll jot it down for you. I live on the other side of this continent.”

She handed me her purple felt-tip pen. I printed my address on a coaster and handed it to her.

“Oh, you’re way over on the Atlantic side of North America.”

“Yep. Hey, would you like some coffee, Chanda?”

“Sure, Mike. Black but extra-sweet.”

“You got it. I’ll be right back.”

I returned with our coffee and retook my seat.

“Thanks.” She turned her head to gaze out the window.

I then noticed a scar under her left ear. I kind of liked it, but wondered what had happened. *Just ask her later.*

“So, am I the 500<sup>th</sup> interviewee, Chanda?”

“No, you’re number 501, Mike.” She had a chuckle. “I disqualified 80% of the respondents right from the start. Most couldn’t follow simple instructions. Your description was four words, just like I requested. So many went way over the limit. I just deleted their messages. Goodbye.”

“I see. Well, by ‘not here for long’ I meant that I will be gone tomorrow. I’ll be flying back home.”

“Oh, I’m leaving, too. On Sunday I’m gone. Don’t worry; I will contact you through the mail.”

“Can you give me a hint about what this is about? Are you looking for someone to live in a cavern with you and then write a novel about it?”

“Oh, Mike, you are very warm.” Chanda laughed again.

“You stated that income is not necessary. Who is picking up the tab?”

“My folks. They are filthy rich from export business.”

“I see.” *Ah, a free-to-roam-and-do-whatever rich girl.*

“Mike, it was great meeting you. But, I must go now. You were on time, unlike most, so you got extra points.” *Extra points? Yes, I’ll take all that I can get.*

“Ok, I’ll be awaiting your letter in my rusty mailbox.” *Rust on his mailbox? Why doesn’t he repaint it?*

“I will contact you. Chanda is not a liar.” *Third person. Nice. She’s something else.*

“I believe you. Well, this has been mega-interesting. It was so nice to meet the lovely lady behind the beguiling ad. Hope we meet again in the second round. Have a splendid New Year’s Day, Chanda.” *Lovely lady? Me? With my ugly scar? Hmm ...*

“You, too, Mike.” Chanda then got up and walked away. *What a strange, captivating, sexy thing she is.*

I would safely make it back to my apartment in Wilmington with \$2 in my wallet and 41 cents in my pocket.

An off-white envelope with a Cambodian postmark would arrive on February – Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> – 1987. The embossed card had just two words:

### **Honorable Mention**

*Well, at least we didn’t come in second.*