

**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



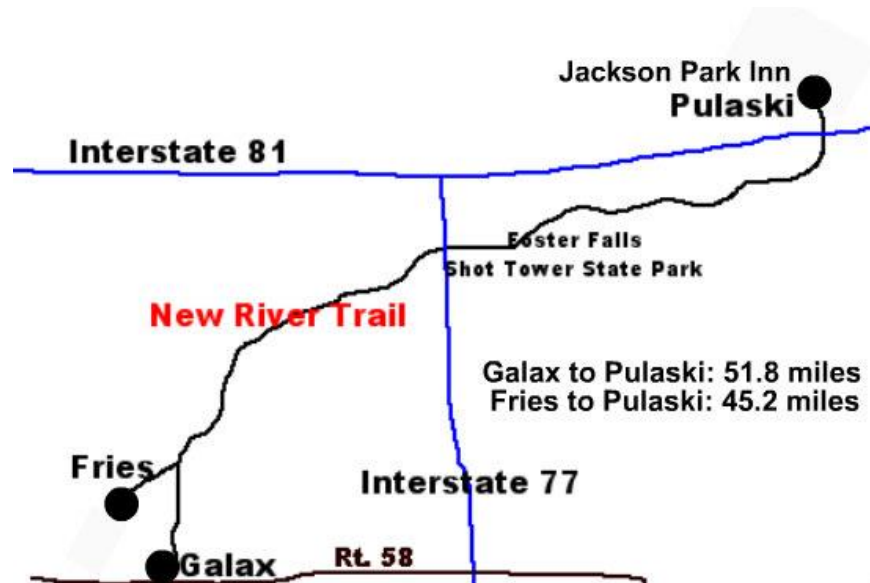
**The Race** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | November 2017

## **The Race**

By Mike Bozart

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John Z. Halpersham III, a 5'-10" (1.78 meters tall); balding; still very much in shape; 44-year-old; often overly demanding; hypercompetitive; currently going through a nasty, lawyer-inflamed, child-custody-involving divorce; salt-and-pepper-Van-Dyke-bearded, bespectacled Caucasian American mid-level project streamliner, just couldn't stop talking about his idea for a *team-building* cycling race with his early-30-something work unit of five, four males and one female. He was waving his hands as he spoke and paced to and fro in his 23<sup>rd</sup>-floor, uptown Charlotte (NC, USA), faux-marble-finished, strategic planning office. When John switched on a ceiling-mounted projector, a crude map appeared on the wall next to him, which looked like this:



“The track for the race will be the New River Trail,” Mr. Halpersham boldly stated in his Queens [the borough in New York City] accent. “How many of you know where that is? Could I see a show of hands? Now, don’t be shy.”

Two of the men, both white 31-year-olds, Bob and Richard, nonchalantly raised their hands. They respectively thought to themselves: *He must have drunk at least five cups of coffee today. / What is he on about now? Did he make that map?*

“Ok, for you other three that don’t get out much,” John continued, “it’s in southwestern Virginia – only two short hours from ye olde Crown Town. [a rarely used, somewhat uppity, nickname for Charlotte] Well, maybe not right now.” (It was 3:53 PM on a Thursday; rush-hour traffic was already clogging construction-pinched Interstate 77 North.)

Mary, a svelte, 30-year-old Asian American, coughed. She had the omnipresent late-summer cold that had infiltrated the Queen City in the third week of September 2016.

This didn’t escape John’s attention. “Mary, as a female, you will be exempt from racing; you will be in charge of team encouragement,” John stated in a patently matter-of-fact manner. “Is that ok?” *How sexist! Just a cheerleader for the boys? He knows that I ride my bike to work three days a week. What a bastard! No wonder his wife is divorcing his chauvinistic ass. What a complete jerk! I should start looking for another job. I just know that if I file a complaint, it will just get worse for me. Wonder what the guys think.*

After several seconds had passed, Mary looked up. “Sure, Mr. Halpersham,” she resigned. “That’s fine.” *God I hate him.*

*Why did I ever take this job? I was too desperate. Should have been more patient. More persistent.*

The four male employees were also taken aback by his remark. *Woah! / Unbelievable. / Can't believe that he just said that. Surely a reprimand is coming. Should I file a complaint? No, Mary should be the one. / It's only a matter of time before HR [human resources] rips him to shreds, or puts the axe to his neck. How has he lasted this long? Maybe he has something on the HR manager. Has he slept with her? Wouldn't be surprised.*

John restarted his pitch with unrestrained gusto. "The nicely restored, century-old Jackson Park Inn in Pulaski will be the finish line. You'll each have your own room there, and I'll foot the bill. To give you guys more of a chance, I will start in Galax, which, as the graphic plainly shows, is 51.8 miles [83.36 km] from Pulaski. And, you guys – well, one of you; the other three will be positioned downline – will get to take off from Fries [spoken like 'freeze'] – and, yes, that's the correct pronunciation. You guys will only have to collectively go 45.2 miles [72.74 km] – 6.6 miles [10.62 km] fewer than me. A nice discount, huh? Hey, I want to give you guys a fighting chance to beat me. Just pretend like I'm the ruthless leader of the rival evil empire." *Pretend? / No need to pretend. / Is he serious? / The divorce is taking its toll on him. / A bad joke. / I'm starting to think that he is seriously losing it. All.*

"What is the trail's surface made of?" Pablo, the 32-year-old, dark-haired, semi-portly Hispanic American asked.

“Finely crushed stone,” John quickly answered. “The trail used to be a freight railway owned by the Norfolk & Western Railroad. It has two tunnels and trestles galore. It’s a fairly easy grade – no steep hills.” *That’s nice. / Thank God. / We just may have a chance. / Beating him at his own, crazy, off-road cycling contest would be sweet, but I bet that he wouldn’t take it well. / I hope that he crashes out in the first mile [1.61 km] and ruptures a sac.*

“Shall we bring our own bikes, sir?” slim, brown-haired Richard asked in his distinct Liverpudlian accent.

“No,” John barked. “I’ll provide and transport the bicycles, which will all be identical three-speeds with 38-millimeter [1.5-inch] tires – not too skinny, and not too fat; decent speed with the necessary footprint for traction.” *What a soft lad! / Boss has gone overboard with the cycling. / Wonder if he’s one of those MAMIL [Middle-aged men in Lycra®] types, sporting a chub. [slang for a curled, semi-erect penis] Totally effing gross!*

“When will this race start?” a now-more-curious Bob asked in his relaxed San Fernando Valley (CA) accent.

“The race will commence at sundown – when the trail has been vacated of all the recreational non-hard-chargers – on Saturday, October 15<sup>th</sup>,” John answered and took a short pause. “It will be an ides of October that none of you will ever forget. Even thirty years from now, way out in 2046, you will all remember our character-building, bonus-chance-enhancing, bonding-under-pressure experience on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October in 2016. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you: All of the bikes will be outfitted with ultra-bright, LED, [light-emitting

diode] 8,400-lumen, see-all-the-way-to-Portugal headlamps. Light won't be an issue." *He's gone mad. / I need to get out of this somehow. / What else does he have in mind? / This Yank [British slang for American] is completely bonkers. / He's coo-coo – lost in a male mid-life crisis.*

"So, each of us will only ride a fraction of the whole distance, right?" the wide-eyed, intrigued, 32-year-old, male, Senegalese work-visa employee asked.

"Yes, Babacar, each of you guys will only ride predefined segments. Since there are four of you racing, you would each only have to ride, on average, a little over eleven miles [17.70 km] each – probably only fifty to fifty-five minutes in the saddle as we cyclists say. A piece of cake. You will pass a special coin to the next rider – like handing off a baton in a relay-type footrace – who will then hand it to the next one, and so on."

Babacar caught the logistical dilemma. "But, boss, let's say that I start off first from Fries. What happens to me and the bike after I am done with my segment?" *Wow! He's got a point there. Must not let them think that I didn't consider this.*

John continued without a hitch. "I'm going to have my older son, Harry, the newly unrestricted-licensed 17-year-old, drop off and pick up you guys, along with the bikes, one after another, in a rented cargo van. You guys just need to designate your start-stop hand-off points at or near public roads. Excuse me for just a second. Let me look at a detailed trail map on my smartphone." *Hope the road crossings are spaced fairly evenly. Don't want to have to cancel this epic crucible.*

“Is this mandatory?” Mary asked while John studied the display on his cell phone’s screen.

“Completely optional – just strongly encouraged for professional development, departmental-unit camaraderie, and career growth,” John rattled off without lifting his eyes. *What a non-disclaimer of a disclaimer. / I guess that I should go. / A free night at a posh historic hotel. Oh, why not? / Hope I can bring Judy. [Richard’s Caucasian American wife] She would want to go. For sure.*

“Can we bring our special someones?” short-blond-haired Bob then asked. *Just more witnesses to the humiliation. / Bob read my mind.*

“Oh, most certainly,” John answered. “Yes, you can all bring your significant others ... if you have one.” *He knows that I’m single and that all the guys have a wife or girlfriend. Such a prick! Wait, does Pablo have a girlfriend? / Oblivious boss still doesn’t know that I’m gay. Certainly won’t bring Freddie. [Pablo’s Latino boyfriend] The homophobe would totally freak ... and get me fired somehow. I’m absolutely sure of it. / Judy will want to do some riding, too. Yeah, we could ride to Draper or even down to Claytor Lake on Sunday. / Jenny [Bob’s Caucasian American girlfriend] may be up for this. / Linda [Babacar’s Jamaican American sometime-companion] may not care to be around John. Probably better to just not mention it to her. She would think that this is utterly ridiculous anyway.*

“Excellent!” Bob gleefully responded. “I’m in.” *Brown-noser!*

“Ok, I got it now,” John suddenly broadcasted. “The first hand-off spot will be where Trestle Road crosses the trail in Ivanhoe. That’s 12.1 miles [19.47 km] from you guys’ starting point in Fries. Babacar, you should be able to knock out the first leg in under sixty-five minutes. Ok, maybe seventy.” John snidely chortled. “You want it? Rest assured that we’re all headed downstream; it’s mostly downhill.” *Literally and figuratively.*

“Sure, why not, boss? I’ll bat – or pedal – leadoff.” Babacar beamed. “You won’t ever see me on the trail, Mr. Halpersham.” He sniggered contentedly. *Well, look here – a cock of the walk has sprouted. Babacar is going to be a car without axles compared to me. It will probably take him well over an hour to do his dozen-mile [19.31 km] segment. ‘No, Babacar, you won’t ever see me, because I will have already beat you to Fries Junction.’ [where the Fries and Galax paths join] Yeah, the race will already be over for all intents and purposes. Though, I must not tell them that. Just let them think that they have a chance. Don’t crush their spirits in the first quarter.*

“Hey, I like that self-confidence, Babacar,” John eventually said. “But, don’t be surprised to hear ‘on your left’ as you near the end of your run.” *That’s not happening.*

Babacar demurely chuckled some more. *John’s not going to make up those half-dozen miles [9.66 km] on me. No how. No way. He’s in for a big surprise. I’m going to start riding again. Shave some pounds off. Build up my endurance and speed. I’ll get my stamina back up. / I’m going to humiliate all four of these amateurs in front of Mary. I’ll win by at least ten minutes. Minimum. She’ll be impressed. She’ll start falling for*



*me. She'll see that I'm more virile than these 30-nothings – the true, well-seasoned alpha dog amongst meek sheep.*

John recommenced his speech. “The second transfer-of-the-special-commemorative-coin location will be the Baker Island Road crossing in Barren Springs, an 11.2 mile [18.02 km] segment. Maybe that’s you, Bob? You want it?” John guffawed. *A commemorative coin for an insane, nighttime, ad hoc bicycle race? / Boss needs to see a shrink. / Gosh, he’s wacked. Totally.*

“Sure, put me down for the second leg,” Bob requested. *Hope that I can catch a second wind by then and put this race to bed. I’ll take some of that stimulant that Jay gave me. I’m going to blow their chains off. / I hope that this isn’t the leg where John passes us – me. Hope Baba[car] doesn’t give up too much time. He’s not in the best of shape. I don’t want to see that smug asshole going by me in the night.*

John then continued. “The third and final transfer spot will be the Julia Simpkins Road crossing in Hiwassee, an 11.3-mile [18.19 km] leg. Is this you, King Richard?” *King? I’m sure that he said that because I’m from England.*

“Sure, I’ll take it,” Richard replied. *I’ll be way ahead by this point, cruising to victory over my cast of schleppers. / Gosh, I hope that John doesn’t pass me during my segment. Oh, he’s probably already rolled past me before I even start the penultimate leg.*

“That leaves a 10.6-mile [17.06 km] homestretch to the hotel’s patio in Pulaski,” John concluded. “Pablo, this is you. Are you ok being the closer for your decidedly underdog

squad?" *He'll only see me passing him as he waits for the coin in Hiwassee. The race winner will be evident: me. An academic exercise from thereon. / I bet that John passes me way before Richard gets to me. I'll just ride leisurely for 50 minutes and crash in a nice, comfy bed.*

"Sure," Pablo vocalized. *Nothing to sweat.*

"Ok then, I believe that we are through here," John declared in closing. "You guys are free to make changes to the order and segment lengths. Just make sure that all of the segments begin/end at public-road crossings. We have to have vehicular access. And, don't forget to solicit Mary for moral support." *What a turd! Grrrr ... No, don't say it.*

The next week went by with no mention of the race in the office by John or anyone else. The five employees concluded that it was just a what-if scenario incisively invented by John; it had to be yet another ploy in which he gauged their reactions to a hypothetical competition.

But then on Monday morning, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, a best-foods-for-cycling e-mail landed in each one of the five employees' inboxes. Later that day, John went by each individual cubicle and informed with a manic expression: "A dozen days 'til a dozen miles. Get ready. It's on!" He departed each time with a beguilingly grin.

The five employees had a secret meeting during their lunch half-hour on Friday, October 7<sup>th</sup> at an eatery in the Epicentre (a mixed-use complex two blocks away). They discussed possible changes to some segments. Mary demanded to ride, too, to cut down the average segment length to nine

miles (14.48 km). She was persuasive. After seventeen minutes of discussion, they unanimously agreed to add her to the lineup. As the third cyclist, Mary would ride the middle 8.1-mile (13.04 km) segment. When such was presented to John, he begrudgingly agreed to it and thought: *Whatever, folks. Whatever.*

Friday, October 14<sup>th</sup> finally arrived in uptown Charlotte. Though, Pablo didn't; he had come down with the flu yesternight and would have to be scratched. At lunch the trio of men suggested three new segments, each divided by road-rail intersections: Fries to Austinville (16.3 miles; 26.23 km), Austinville to Allisonia (16.4 miles; 26.39 km), and Allisonia to Pulaski (12.5 miles; 20.12 km). However, Mary dismissed it and requested to just use the original four-segment plan, and assume Pablo's final leg. The males tried to talk her into taking a shorter, to-be-created mid-segment, which would either be in the second or third position. But, Mary would have none of it. She reminded the guys that she rode more miles each week than any of them. The three men acceded to her demands. When this substitution was shared with John at 3:13 PM, he just smirked. *Mary and her little lambs are all going to slaughter. Maybe I'll ride right alongside her as we approach Pulaski. Should I let her win? No way! I'll power-pedal it, and sprint away from her in the last 500 yards. [457 meters]*

At 2:52 PM on an autumnally splendid, mild, sunny Saturday (the 15<sup>th</sup> of October), Bob, Babacar, Mary, Richard and Judy motored out of Charlotte in Bob's silver 2013 Buick Encore. Jenny had decided to pass on the trip; she surmised that it would be massive ennui. Mary agreed to join the carpool

once she learned that Judy was going. Babacar rode shotgun; Mary, Richard and Judy took the backseat.

On the way up to Statesville on Interstate 77, the four employees explained the race in detail to Judy. She was at first flabbergasted. But then after quietly thinking it over, she deduced that what this race was really about was who would get the next promotion. However, she kept this psychological analysis to herself.

At 4:54 they were disembarking from the crossover SUV in a large Walmart Supercenter parking lot off US 58-221. John had picked Appleby's as their five o'clock dinner rendezvous. Harry would pull the white van into the asphalt parking lot four minutes later.

The seven of them sat together at a table in the back of the American chain restaurant. It wasn't yet crowded. Surprisingly, John was not his usual braggart self. Maybe it was because his son was sitting next to him, having a subduing influence. Or, maybe it was because auburn-haired Judy, whom he really didn't know, was sitting directly across from him.

"Sunset is at 6:47," John announced after all the orders were taken by the mid-20-something, tart-like, bleach-blonde, Caucasian American waitress. "Harry will drop me – and my just-the-same-as-yours bike – off first at the Galax trailhead, which is just three miles [4.83 km] down the road from here. Then you guys will follow him over to the Fries trailhead, which is only a fifteen-minute drive. We'll start the race at seven sharp – right on the nose. I plan on being snug in my

bed at the inn in Pulaski at eleven o'clock, watching the local news."

"So, after dropping Babacar and his bike off in Fries, we will proceed to the first coin-transfer point in Ivanhoe?" Bob enquired.

"Exactly," John confirmed.

Richard noticed a potential quandary. "But, who will drive Bob's car when Bob is riding his segment?"

"Any of you could drive it," John replied, relieved that this wasn't an overlooked, race-threatening, logistical issue. "You all have driver's licenses, right?"

"I'll be glad to advance your car to the next stop, Bob," Judy offered. *There's the solution. / I can trust her driving.*

"Problem solved," Bob plainly stated. "Thanks, Judy. I'll drive it again after my segment is done."

"Ok, are we all good now?" John asked, sounding ready to get going at 6:09. "All clear now on the details?"

The adults all nodded. Harry kept eating.

"Oh, the coin ... do you have it on you, John?" Richard asked. *Of course.*

"Thanks for reminding me, Richard. I have it right here." John then handed what looked like a poker chip to Babacar. "If Mary gets this coin to the Jackson Park Inn before I do, you guys won't only win, but will receive something unforeseen."

The four employees had the same thought: *I wonder what in the world that could be.*

John picked up the tab. Everyone thanked him except Harry, who now sported a sullen look for some unknown reason. Mary thought: *For a first-class ass, he sure is generous.*

Soon Bob's silver Buick was following the rented white van that was being driven by Harry towards downtown Galax as the sky grew dusky. After crossing Chestnut Creek and a red caboose on permanent display, the vehicles turned right into a now-vacant gravel parking lot.

John swiftly got his bike out and checked the tire pressure. Satisfied, he waved for Harry to go on. As Bob made a U-turn to follow Harry, John yelled: "Don't start before seven o'clock, Babacar. No cheating!"

Babacar nodded as Bob made a left out of the parking lot to follow Harry back northeast on US 58-221. At a forking Glendale Road, Harry made a soft left. Bob followed as the sun slipped to the tree line on the horizon. Then the white van's left turn signal was flashing again. Harry turned onto Cliffview Road. They weaved through forests and fields to arrive at Fries Road. Harry turned right this time. He didn't go very far before making another left. It was mostly dark woods on both sides of the road for five minutes. Then there was a long bridge over the wide-but-not-so-deep New River. The two-lane road then paralleled the broad stream and trail into the tiny town of Fries. They pulled into the gravel parking area. *We made it. / So, this is where it begins. / This little Blue Ridge town has seen better days. / It feels so eerie here. / Hubby's boss is nuts.*

Harry then unloaded a bicycle for Babacar. It was a refreshing 59° Fahrenheit (15° Celsius) at 6:48. Twilight was settling as Babacar switched on the headlamp. *Wow! That's as bright as the [Las] Vegas strip!*

At 7:00 on the dot, the two vehicles drove off and Babacar started pedaling down the gray trail. He settled into a 15-MPH (24.14 km/h) cadence on the packed stone chips. Soon it was pitch-dark. His headlamp was more than sufficient, though. He pedaled a little faster as he looked at the languid surface of the now-almost-black river on his right. *I feel good. This isn't a problem. No way is John making up that deficit on me. Not happening.*

John was already 3.2 miles (5.15 km) down the Galax spur at seven o'clock, as he had started pedaling along the two-meter-wide (6.56 feet) path that followed Chestnut Creek at 6:49 – insouciantly disregarding his own race's prescribed start time. He was cruising in high gear on the mostly smooth, flat to descending, off-road path at a brisk pace of 18 MPH (28.97 km/h). *Wonder where Babacar is right now. Wonder if I'll beat him to Fries Junction. Maybe overly optimistic. Plenty of time to catch and pass one of them later. Yeah, no need to kill the suspense so early.*

Babacar would arrive at Fries Junction first. He looked to his right down the 1,089-foot-long (332 meters), diagonally aligned trestle over the tranquil river. He didn't see a light. *I'm sure that I arrived here first. I'm certain that I'm ahead of John. Just need to keep up the pace. No letup. Need to finish strong.*

Just then John entered a short, curved tunnel. He thought that he saw a dark animal pass by the exit portal. *Holy shit! Was that a black bear? Damn! Forgot the pepper spray. Those bears can run up to 33 MPH. [53.11 km/h] I can't achieve that kind of speed on this bike on this trail. Hope my headlamp spooked it away.*

John emerged from the tunnel. He then looked back. Nothing was chasing him. *Whew! Got lucky there.*

After passing through a stretch of dense woods, way out of sight of the river, Babacar started to cross a short bridge over the mouth of Brush Creek. He again saw the New River, which was making a slow, lazy, wide-right (eastward) turn. There was no sign of John. *Still ahead of the boss. Must hold onto this lead. Getting passed in the first segment would be beyond awful. I'd never hear the end of it. 'In just a measly 5.8 miles, [9.33 km] Babacar lost the race for you guys.' That would be horrible. Must pedal harder.*

In the middle of the bridge to Fries Junction, John stopped, dismounted his bike, drank some water, and texted Harry.

Has Babacar arrived yet, son?

Eighteen seconds later he got a one-word answer from his increasingly bored teenager.

No.

John popped a couple of Jay's quasi-amphetamine pills. Then he got back on his bike and charged across the old, single-track, level, chain-link-fence-added-to-the-railings-for-child-safety railroad trestle. *Kayaking at night on this river*



*would be exciting. Maybe too exciting for my troupe. Wonder where Babacar is. Guess I'll find out soon enough. No need to panic. I'll soon be zooming past one of them. 'Hello Richard, it's me; I'm on your wheel; you've been caught by your Yankee-Doodle-Dandy boss.' No, that's wrong; it's Bob who is going second. Mr. West Coast is going down to his East Coast daddy-o.*

Babacar raced onward under the luminous, nearly full, post-harvest moon. Soon he was passing Byllesby Dam on his right at 13.7 MPH (22.05 km/h). He noticed the river's surface lapping over the lip of the old concrete spillway. *So, that's why there was no current. Wonder how far I'm ahead of John. Am I really ahead? Surely. Hope so.*

Buck Dam was just 2.4 miles (3.86 km) downstream from Byllesby Dam. It was here that a rapidly pedaling John (now ripping it over the minced gravels at 19 MPH – 30.58 km/h) first caught a glimpse of Babacar's flashing red taillight. *I've already reeled in the first fish. This race is over. I'll ease up. Don't want Babacar to detect me. I'm now the killer whale playing with the to-be-eaten-later seals.*

Babacar soon saw the white van, and then Bob's car, both down on the right, just before the short bridge over Trestle Road. His leg was done, and so were both of his legs at 7:57. *Yey! I made it. Barely. Glad that's over.*

"Good job, mate!" Richard yelled. "You didn't get overtaken."

"Toss me the coin," Bob implored as he mounted his already-lit-up bike.

Babacar obliged.

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