

**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



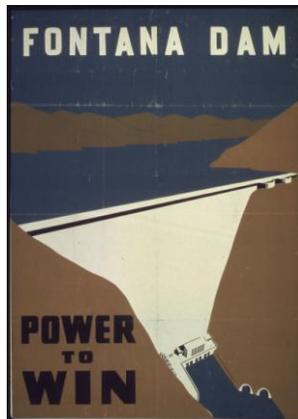
**Nantahala** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | February 2019

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by Mike Bozart

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“Guys, the straight-line, west-east, gravity-type, hydroelectric dam is 480 feet [146 meters] high – the tallest in the Eastern United States – and it was completed on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944,” Tim Palmerone III informed his adolescent duo as he displayed one of his cherished World War II U.S. government posters in his southeast Charlotte, split-level, dark-paneled den.



Tim’s lanky, rusty-brown-haired, olive-green-eyed, just-last-week-turned-seventeen, thin-from-undereating son just raised his eyebrows. And then looked back down, thoroughly non-enthused. He had been diagnosed with juvenile depression.

Nevertheless, 45-year-old, bespectacled, sandy-blond-haired, steel-gray-eyed Tim continued with his Thursday evening pitch. “The deep lake is some thirty miles [48 km] long. And get this, guys – the Appalachian Trail actually goes across the top of the dam! How would you two like to go up to Fontana Lake this weekend? The weather forecast looks super-nice: fair skies with highs around 72.” [degrees Fahrenheit; 22° Celsius] *Why in the world does dad want to take us there? Would much rather stay here and play video games. The wireless internet connection here is so much faster than mom’s. / Gosh, that sounds so cool! I bet Josh doesn’t want to go. He never wants to do anything anymore. / Fingers figuratively crossed for a pair of yes votes.*

“I would love to go, dad!” scientifically inclined, ninth-grade-honor-student, chocolate-brown-haired, hazel-eyed Julia replied with veritable verve. “Maybe we will see some cracks in the dam from the alkali-aggregate reactions.” *The what? Yes, she really is a savant. She’s going places. The only thing that could trip her up would be a lousy, loser-type boy.*

*And, I think that she's smart enough to navigate around that potential pitfall. / Dad loves Julia more than me; he always has. He favors her because she is so much more scholastic than me. Or, maybe he thinks that I prefer mom to him. Maybe that's it.*

"How about you, my keen son?" *Please say 'Yes'. / Keen? Oh, please. Spare me, dad.*

"How long will it take to get there?" Josh listlessly enquired.

"Just under four hours if we don't stop," Tim divulged.

"Four freaking hours!" Josh exclaimed with a surfeit of exasperation. "That's as long as going to the beach!"

"We'll stop wherever you want for lunch, son," Tim offered, trying to salvage his final best chance for a mountain-weekend-together getaway.

Lips-sullenly-sealed Josh then slowly nodded. *Thank God! He's onboard. / This had better be worth it. Bet it's not. / Yey!*

"Great!" Tim blurted with obvious relief. "I've already got our lodging picked out; it's a small, rustic cabin near the scenic Nantahala River Gorge."

"Nanta-HAY-la?" Josh was perplexed. *Where the hell is that? Dad sure picks the weirdest places.*

"Nantahala is a Cherokee word that literally means 'land of the noon sun'," Julia proudly proclaimed. *She's such a smarty pants. And, a constant showoff for dad. / I bet my girl places out of freshman history, math, science, and English.*

<ding-doooooong>

"Dad, you really need to fix your doorbell," Josh stoically remarked. "It's sounds creepy as hell." *I kind of like it.*

"Ah, you don't like it, son? I got it off of ebay. Anyway, run along. Don't keep your mother waiting. And, do well in school tomorrow. I'll pick you two up Saturday morning [April 26, 2014] at 7:45 AM sharp. Deal?" *Lame deal. But might as well go along. Don't want to be labeled the deal-breaker.*

"Deal!" Julia confirmed with enthusiasm. "I'll be all ready to go in my new hiking gear." *Excellent.*

“Ok, dad, see you then,” Josh relented. *It seems that he has taken the divorce much harder than his sister. He blames – and hates – me for it.*

At 8:19 AM Saturday, they were passing Crowders Mountain on Interstate 85 South. Josh, sitting alone in the rear seat of the 2009, quartz-silver-metallic Subaru Legacy, spotted the cliffs and remembered hiking up them five years prior. He mused: *Mom and dad seemed fine on that day. Divorce was unimaginable. Wonder what caused the split. Bet one of them was cheating on the other. Bet it was dad. Mom probably busted him having an affair with a coworker. Wish she would just tell me the reason. / Josh seems lost in thought. Wonder what he’s thinking about. Who knows?*

When they hit the fifth stoplight in Shelby on US 74, Tim wondered if his kids were hungry. “Want to stop for a quick breakfast? I’m buying.” He chuckled.

Julia, seated in the front passenger seat, shook her head. “I can hold out ‘til lunch, dad,” she asserted.

Josh just vocalized a half-breath exhalation: “Nuh.”

As they crossed the sage-green Broad River, Tim recalled a canoeing trip with his long-gone pal, John. *That cheap, plastic, half-red/half-blue, cereal-box compass that fell in the water. Wonder if it floated all the way down to Columbia. Wonder exactly where it is right now. Probably in pieces in the Goat Shoals silt. Silt in the gill slit.*

Julia caught a glimpse of White Oak Mountain as the sedan zipped past the green sign for Polk County. She thought: *Almost in the Blue Ridge [Mountains] now. But, we still have quite a ways to go. Wonder how long the hike to the dam is.*

Soon they were passing the small town of Columbus and merging onto Interstate 26 West. The Subaru charged up the curving incline without much problem. Twenty-seven silent minutes later, Tim took Exit 33 for Asheville Outlets (a remodeled mall surrounded by chain restaurants). They were in the McRonald’s drive-thru line at 10:41 AM. *Wish they would eat healthier food. Wonder if Nancy [Tim’s ex and the mother of both kids] lets them eat fast food. / Dad is such a softie compared to mom. / So glad that he let us eat here. I love these French fries.*

The journey soon recommenced on I-40 West. They passed three C-townships (Candler, Canton, and Clyde), and then took Exit 27 for US 74 West (Great Smoky Mountain Expressway). It was sunny and the traffic was fairly light. *Everything seems to be going fine. Though, they sure are quiet. Maybe they know that I am going to tell them something pretty heavy later. Maybe they can sense it.*

As they began to go around the town of Waynesville, the amber CHECK ENGINE light suddenly came on. *Damn! Wouldn't you know it! Everything was going so well – too well, I suppose. Though, the engine is still running cool. Oil pressure is ok. Battery still charged; alternator is fine. No funny sounds. Ah, let's just go for it. The light was probably programmed to come on. Probably a mileage threshold was crossed. The dreaded 'dealership light'. Ned's term. Wonder what he is doing today. Probably holed up in a bar by one o'clock. A safe bet.*

Julia saw Tim's look of concern. "Is everything ok, dad?"

"Yeah, it's all good, sweetie. We should be there in an hour." *Another freaking hour! This drive is taking forever. But once there, I'm going to have my own kind of fun. Oh, yeah! I'm breaking away from dad and sis. I'll go on my own special – extra-spatial – hike. / Dad sure looked troubled by something. Wonder what Josh is thinking about. He seems so pensive, like he's scheming.*

When they passed under the US 441 overpass, Tim turned his head to the left and thought back to the time when he and his then-wife took the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad from Dillsboro to Bryson City in mid-November of 1996, just five months before Josh was born. *The future sure seemed as bright as the cloudless autumn sky on that brisk day. And as clear as the sediment-settled Tuckasegee River. We were on our way to becoming the quintessential American nuclear family. Those yellow-to-orange fallen leaves languidly floating on the water's surface. All decomposed long ago. Reconstituted somewhere. Into something. Else.*

Josh and Julia both had their headphones on as the Subaru snaked through the already-quite-green Smoky Mountains. Tim then merged right to begin NC 28, initially a two-lane highway, which wound northwestward. In just a half-mile (.8 km), it became a divided four-lane highway. And then the road swung wide to the left. As they crossed the mouth of

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