

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



THE CIPHER by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | March 2018

The Cipher

by Mike Bozart

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It was a chilly March Tuesday morning in 2008 with sporadic flurries a-flying in the Great Appalachian Valley town of Wytheville (Virginia, USA) as 47-year-old Walter pulled his old, fender-wells-rusted, gray F-250 pickup truck into the parking lot behind the historic, somewhat art-deco, built-in-1928-but-no-longer-showing-movies Millwald Theater. He shifted the steering-column lever into Park and mused: *Need to get that house done today. Hope those mountain roads don't get nasty. The front tires hardly have any tread left. Would hate to slide into a ravine.*

Walter then marched his 6'-2" (1.88 meters tall), burly, Caucasian frame up a narrow alley to West Main Street (US 11). A snowflake suddenly landed right in the corner of his right eye as he looked southwestward down the sparsely populated sidewalk. Walter then made a tight U-turn around a metal railing and descended into a subterranean coffee shop: Nethergroundz.

There were only three customers in the small, windowless, decidedly unpretentious, dungeon-like java joint: a Caucasian middle-aged lady in a blue dress seated at a small table reading a book, an early-20-something Amerasian dude perusing a free weekly, and a mid-30-something Latino guy in work overalls filling up his large cup from the self-service house-blend spigot.

The mechanical-sounding ambient music's volume was very low; it blended with the cooler compressor's hum. So well in fact that Walter did a double-take and thought: *Is that a recording, or is that horizontal refrigerator on its last legs?*

The 40-ish Native American (Cherokee) barista eyed sandy-haired Walter as he walked up to the counter. She anticipated his customary order. "The usual Bolivian Bold?" she asked as she brushed her long black bangs aside.

"Go bold or go home." Walter chuckled to himself. "You have the memory of an elephant, Stephanie, but a much slimmer figure."

"Flirting with a taken woman. That will get you a yellow card, Mr. Walter Johnson. The next one will be red."

"Forgive me, Stephanie; I thought that you were still single. Please excuse my mantality." [*sic*]

"Mantality? Did you just coin that word?"

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