

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 middle-aged Caucasian 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?"

“No, I read it somewhere. An online short story I think.”

“Busy day ahead?” Stephanie asked, unmoved, while glancing at the other customers.

“No, not really. Just one house to inspect up in Bland.”

“Are the roads ok past the first tunnel?”

“Yeah, I think so. The real snow is staying up in WV. [West Virginia] At least I hope so.”

“Me, too.”

Walter soon took a seat in a dark corner with his mug of strong coffee. It was his typical spot. He picked up a discarded newspaper: *The Roanoke Times*. It was from yesterday, but he began to read it anyway. There was an article about a proposal to bring Amtrak passenger-train service back to downtown Roanoke within a decade.

As Walter straightened the newspaper, a logo-less business card fell out. He picked it up from the knotty-pine table. The bold black text on white cardstock read:

**Gsv jfrxp, yildm, hob ulc qfnkh levi gsv
ozab wlt, dsrxs dzh wzbwivznrmt
zylfg zm vcgvmvwv kzmtizn.**

Walter pondered the cryptic message. *Looks like some Eastern European language. The usual vowels are in short supply. Levi is the only recognizable word – a lowercase proper noun? It's some kind of code. But, who created it?*

He then flipped the card around and read:

The cipher on the reverse is an extended popular pangram.
Hint: The English alphabet gets split in half and folded over.
Once solved, post on the psecret psociety Facebook page.

Walter looked around. Everyone was preoccupied. *This feels like a setup of some sort. Is it some kind of artsy prank? Wonder if I'm on some secret camera right now being broadcast to Facebook live. Just wonderful. Forgot to shave.*

Seven minutes and seven seconds later, Walter walked back up to the counter. "Stephanie, who was the last person to read this copy of *The Roanoke Times* in here?"

"Oh, I have no idea, Walter," Stephanie replied with a dumbfounded expression wrapped about her oval, light-brown face. "Why?"

"Just wondering. It's nothing really. Have a nice day."

"You, too," she said with a furtive grin.

Walter exited the underground establishment. As he walked back up the stairway, he thought: *How much is the rent for this place? I bet Steve [the coffee-shop owner] got a sweetheart deal.*

As Walter motored north on Interstate 77, he noticed the snow flurries increasing in intensity. *Just a small squall passing by. Still should be ok in Bland.*

When his 1998 Ford pickup truck emerged on the north side of the Big Walker Mountain Tunnel, it was nearly whiteout conditions. *What the hell! Where did this come from? None of the forecasts predicted accumulating snow in this area.*

Traffic slowed down to 33 MPH (53 km/h) as snow was now coating the light-gray asphalt highway. Eighteen-wheelers were pulling into the weigh station and parking. *That's not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.*

As he took Exit 52 for the county seat of Bland, Walter noticed a Chevy dually-type pickup truck off to the left in the snow-covered grass with a man bent down looking at the right rear wheels. His truck had slid off the descending ramp. Walter decelerated. *Don't want to repeat his mistake. That guy has – or had – way more rubber in contact with the road than me, and he still managed to slide off. I'll just crawl. Take a break at a service station. Just let this impulse pass by.*

At the snow-splattered STOP sign, Walter turned right onto South Scenic Highway (US 52). After a nerve-racking, tortoise-paced, third-of-a-mile (.53 km) slog, he pulled into a gasoline station on the right. It had a convenience store with

a small diner inside. *Perfect. I'll just kill some time here and eat a slice of pizza. It's probably still fresh at this hour; the heat lamp hasn't ruined the cheese yet.*

After eating a thick, chewy, Chicago-deep-dish-style mushroom quarter-medium-pizza wedge, Walter got the cipher card out of his shirt pocket, as the snow was still coming down at a good clip. He studied the letters and then recalled some deciphering tips. *Focus on separate letters first, as they can only be an 'A' or an 'I'. Well, unless it's a poem, then it could be an 'O'. Darn it! There are no single letters in this perplexing sentence.*

Just then Walter's left arm began to feel like it was made of lead. Then his left leg. There was a sharp pain behind his right ear. He was having a hemorrhagic stroke. (He had forgone his high-blood-pressure cocktail of pills.)

He slumped over and then fell out of the plastic chair. The mid-30-ish Caucasian cashier came running back to him. He was already unconscious. She called for medic.

The paramedics arrived eight minutes later. However, despite the medical personnel's best efforts, it would be to no avail. Walter would be pronounced dead on arrival at the Wythe County Community Hospital.

That evening at her one-bedroom apartment on West Washington Street, Stephanie wondered about Walter. *Has he solved my little cipher yet? Did it amuse him?*

Suddenly a coyote-like animal dashed by her blinds-partially-open kitchen window. *Was that a fox?*

Hint no. 1:

A	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
B	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A
C	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B
D	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C
E	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D
F	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E
G	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F
H	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
I										R																
J	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
K	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
L	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
M	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L

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