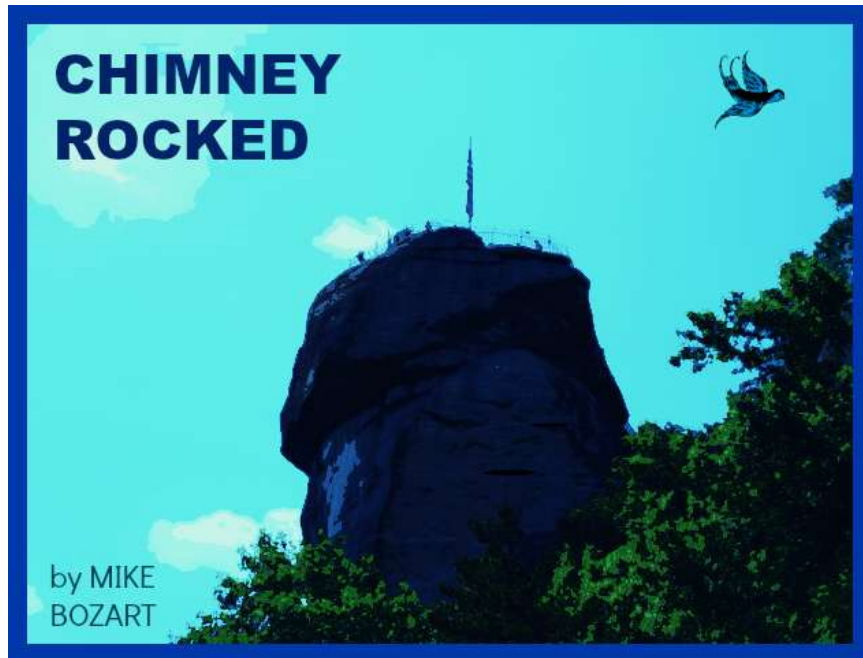


**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



Chimney Rocked by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | APR 2016

We (my Filipina wife, Monique, Agent 32; my twelve-year-old Amerasian son, Agent 666, who would later drop a 6 and become Agent 66; Angeline, an 81-year-old Caucasian widow; Kelvin, a 60-year-old Caucasian truck driver and general screwball; and I, Agent 33) finished our Sunday brunch at Fireside Restaurant on Sugarloaf Road in Hendersonville (NC, USA). We walked up to the cash register and nonchalantly paid our bills. Once out on the asphalt parking lot, we discussed plans for this splendidly crisp April day.

“I think that we will do Chimney Rock today,” I said to Angeline and Kelvin. (Angeline and Kelvin both appear in the previous short story *High Peak Revisited*.) “Want to join us?”

“Michael, you know that I can’t do that kind of strenuous walking!” Angeline exclaimed. *She sure loves to call me Michael.*

“But, it has an elevator, Angeline,” I said.

“The elevator is not working,” Kelvin interjected. “I checked their website. It will cost the three of you \$32. They’re giving a discount because of the elevator being down.”

“That’s kewl,” [*sic*] I replied. “You don’t want to go with us?”

“No, I think I’ll pass, too,” Kelvin answered.

And with that we said our farewells. Angeline and Kelvin headed back to High Peak Mountain, about 15 miles (24 km) to the west. We (Agents 32, 666 and 33) headed east on US 64. *Ah, such perfect weather.*

“Dad, how far away is Chimney Rock?”

“Only 16 miles, [25.75 km] son.”

“Have you ever been there before?” Monique asked.

“One time, back in 1989 with Frank [the late, great Agent 107] and a guy we called ‘the mighty Hev’. [at last check in Arizona] But, it didn’t end well, Agent 32.” *Agent 32? Ok, it’s open-mic[rophone] time.*

“What do you mean, Agent 33?” Monique asked, suddenly very curious to know more.

“Well, we didn’t enter the park the proper way. To avoid paying the hefty-to-us-at-the-time entrance fee, we hiked in via the waterfall.” *Via the waterfall? / WTF did dad do?!*

“Dad, you guys hiked up that waterfall?! [He had seen pictures of Hickory Nut Falls in brochures.] That’s totally insane, dad! How in the world did you guys do it? Did you use ropes and hooks?”

“Not the 400-foot vertical drop, son. We just boulder-hopped up the Falls Creek cascades from the Broad River to the base of the main waterfall.” *Dad sure was adventurous in his younger days. / I bet they were high or drunk. Probably both.*

“Dad, it’s 404 feet – not 400.” *He’s right.*

“Ah, you remembered that palindromic number. Good job, son.” *What? / Palindromic number? Huh?*

“Well, what went wrong up there?” Monique asked.

“The sun suddenly dropped below the ridge,” I began. “Therefore, we started to rush our descent, as we didn’t want to be hiking on the mountain in the pitch-dark. Frank then stopped to survey a very steep deer trail, but then passed on it, thinking it was too risky. I then went over to it and said: ‘Let’s not be wussies. [sic] We can do this!’ Famous last words. I grabbed a hold of a tree branch to steady my initial drop-down. The limb was dead and immediately snapped off the tree trunk. I then slid feet-first in near-free-fall down a 70-degree, leaf-covered slope, coming to a sudden stop when my left shoe slammed hard into a granite outcrop. When I looked at my left foot, it was flopped over 90 degrees. I had broken my ankle in seven places.” *Ouch! / Wow!*

“How did you get out of there?” my son asked.

“Frank and Hev helped me hobble down through the woods to an old logging road,” I said. “Then Frank ran down to his pickup truck and drove it up to where Hev and I were.”

“How bad did your ankle hurt?” Monique then asked.

“Surprisingly, it wasn’t excruciating,” I replied. “On a scale of zero to ten, about a seven. I was able to make it all the way back to Charlotte, [a 1:45 drive] where I got medical attention in the old Mercy Hospital’s Emergency Room.” *What a ridiculous misadventure. / I’m glad that we are going in the proper way. This place sounds dangerous.*

I slowed down as we crossed the boulder-strewn Broad River and approached the Bat Cave T-intersection. At the stop sign, I turned right onto US 74-A/US 64. We followed the brook downstream, southeasterly, for a few miles (about

5 km), finally arriving at the Chimney Rock State Park entrance on the right. *Ah, we're already here. / So, this is where it will begin. / I don't see the Chimney Rock.*

We entered the park and began to slowly climb the base of the mountain on the old, narrow, asphalt-missing-in-spots road. Three fourths of a mile (1.2 km) later, we were paying our entrance fee at the gatehouse. *Wow, Kelvin was right: \$32 exactly for the three of us.*

The park employees directed us to an overflow parking lot. (The upper lot was apparently full.) We then exited the car and walked over to a bus stop. Three minutes later we were boarding a reconditioned school bus.

Up we climbed, switchback by switchback. Inside the fourth (or fifth?) hairpin turn was a house.

"Imagine if that were our house," I offered.

"No thanks, dad. No yard and traffic going right by the windows."

We did a couple of more switchbacks and then arrived at the upper bus stop. We jumped off and began walking towards the upper parking lot (which indeed was completely full). Then the steps started.

We marched up the twisting wooden stairway, flight by flight, sigh by sigh. After climbing maybe 80 feet (24.4 meters), we took a break at an unoccupied landing.

"How much farther?" my wife asked between gasps.

“Just look up there, mahal,” [love in Tagalog] I replied.

Monique and my son looked up the side of the official Chimney Rock, a 315-foot (96 meters), cylindrical, gray, granite monolith. There was a large American flag waving on top. We could see hordes of people looking out over the black metal railing. *Never trust a railing. [reference short story ‘The Balcony’] / I’d hate to fall from there. Certain death. / Wow! We still have a lot more stairclimbing to do.*

“We might be a fourth of the way there,” I said.

“Gosh, let me catch my breath,” Monique said. “I didn’t know that there were so many steps.” *I should have worn athletic shoes. These boots are killing me.*

Soon we were mashing the wooden steps once again. I heard German and Japanese as we ascended the galvanized-steel-supported stairway. *They must be advertising this internationally. Looks like they redid this stairway fairly recently. Nice concrete footings. Completely rock solid.*

Four minutes later we were done climbing the steps on the Outcroppings Trail. Now there was just a narrow walkway to cross to get to the Chimney Rock. I walked ahead twenty feet and then looked back. Agent 666 was still on the bench. Monique was talking to him.

She then looked up at me. “He doesn’t want to go up there,” Agent 32 shouted. “He’s afraid.”

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