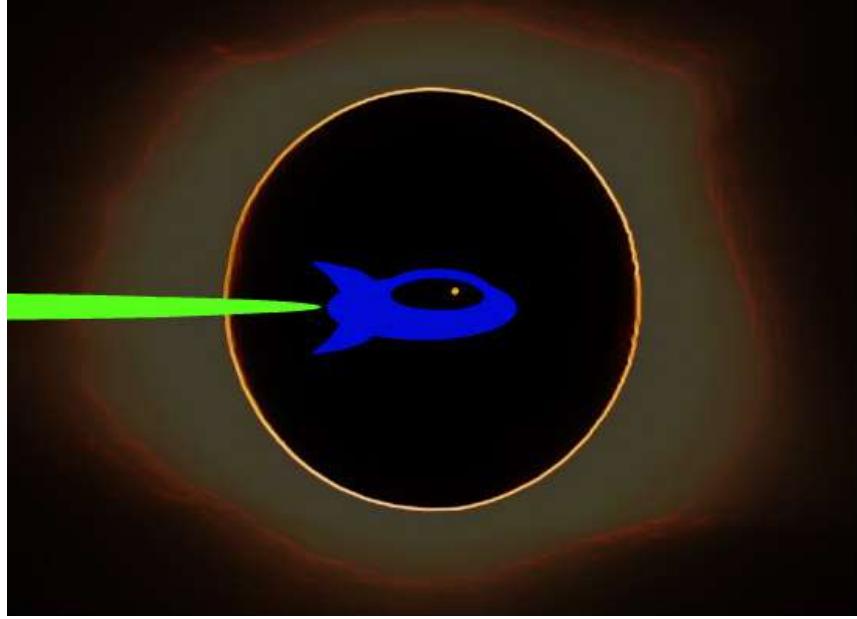


another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Columbia Eclipsed by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | Aug. 2017

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by Mike Bozart

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At 6:32 AM in the predawn of Monday, August 21st, 2017, I parked the old grey ghost (our 2005 Kia Rio hatchback) in the middle of the unexpectedly-still-vacant asphalt lot off the western end of Laurel Street in Columbia (SC, USA). There would be an eclipse-viewing event later in the adjacent Riverfront Park. Without prior notice, a middle-aged female Caucasian jogger in a USC (University of South Carolina) Gamecocks tank top passed by our front bumper. *She's certainly not lazy. Dedicated to her regimen, even in this sauna-like weather. / What discipline.*

Monique (Agent 32, my adventure-loving Filipina wife) and I (Caucasian Agent 33) had left east Charlotte at 4:44 AM, as we feared a traffic jam after seeing the images from Oregon. Surprisingly, traffic wasn't too bad on the 101-mile (163 km) trek down Interstate 77 in the dark; we had beat the stampede from points north.

We got out of the car and walked down to the trailhead, curled around the restroom buildings, and then walked onto a steel pedestrian bridge. I looked down midway across and saw a water snake slithering up the distant muddy bank of the 1891 hydroelectric canal. *Should I tell Monique? No, snakes freak her out. She'll want to leave. / What lies ahead today? Hope we don't have to walk too far. It's already hot, and the sun hasn't even cleared the trees.*

At a T-intersection the infernal sun crested the tree line. We turned right, as the paved trail to the left was locked-off for some reason. About 800 feet (244 meters) down the Three Rivers Greenway, which ran along a slender island for 2.4 miles (3.86 km) between the Columbia Canal and the Congaree River, an overlook appeared on the left. We walked on the elevated deck, spying the river 30 feet (nine meters) below. I saw a large snapping turtle blithely swimming with the current for a while, and then it dove out of sight, down into the depths of the dark green water. *Boy, that one was a monster. Maybe even bigger than the one I saw in Little Sugar Creek [in south Charlotte] a decade ago. / It would suck saggy balls to fall off this. Hope hubby doesn't do anything foolish. No place for a medical situation.*

Suddenly a 60-ish Caucasian guy appeared. He was in jeans and a logo-less yellow knit shirt. As he started peering over the railing, I wondered who he might be. *Is he here for the eclipse? Or, is he just another local out for morning*

exercise? No, if he were a local, he wouldn't be looking around the way he is. It's obvious that he's never been here, either. / Hope this man isn't buang. [crazy in Cebuano]

"Hello, are you down here for the solar eclipse?" I ventured.

"Yeah, sure am. The last one that I saw was in the Marshall Islands out in the Pacific on March 9th, 2016. It lasted over four minutes. I got some great pics and video, which I sped up to make a nice 20-second clip."

I then noticed his camera bag. "So, you're an eclipse chaser," I said, stating the now-obvious.

"Yep, an umbraphile – the 50-cent name," he replied. *Umbraphile? That's right: Umbra means shadow. Is his significant other an umbrellaphile? [sic] / Wonder if he's a rank-and-file logophile.*

"Where did you come from?" Monique then asked. *Earth.*

"Charleston," the gentleman stated.

"South Carolina, right?" I asked just to be certain, as his accent was hard to place.

"Yes, the Charleston by sea. However, being near the ocean is not so ideal today. The outer bands of an Atlantic storm are forecast to send in a lot of clouds and even some rain today. That's why I decided to drive to Columbia. Better sky conditions. I got here in just two hours." *Not 2:02? Why do I think such numerical nonsense? / I bet that my husband wanted an oddly exact time. He's such a numerician. [sic]*

"I hear ya," I said. "We drove down from Charlotte. Traffic was mostly light. No real issues." *Except his ungodly morning breath. Hubby must have skipped the mouthwash in his haste to get out of the house.*

"A buddy of mine from Charlotte is supposed to meet me here later," the light-brown-hair-fading-to-silver man said. "I hope that he doesn't wait too long to leave. I've sat in Charlotte morning rush-hour traffic before. I imagine that today could be horrendous with all of the eastern Ohio, western Pennsylvania, West Virginia and southwestern Virginia traffic funneling through; it could be a real bottleneck." *Maybe so. / He sure knows his geography. Maybe he's a map-freak like my bana. [husband in Cebuano]*

“Plus the Triad and Triangle traffic,” I added.

“Yeah, those North Carolina metros will be coming down [Interstate] 77, too,” the possibly one-time scratch golfer concurred.

“I’m just glad that we’re already here,” I conveyed. “It’s a big relief. We’ve got the car safely parked in a free lot with no time limit. We’ll be on foot from hereon. We can find things to do to fill the intervening time.” *I certainly hope so. We’ve got over seven hours to kill. / This red-haired guy is not going to do any more driving in Columbia? Weird. That’s off-the-charts parking phobia. Almost as bad as Marty.*

“Will you be videoing and taking photos from here today?” Monique then asked him. *She’s the one with more sense.*

“Not here exactly,” he answered. “Those trees may be in the way – just a tad too tall. But, probably around here.” He then looked down at the river again. “Hey, I just saw the biggest alligator snapping turtle in my entire life. And, I’ve seen quite a few in my time.” *Wow! Another one? Or, the same one? This area must be Snapperville [sic] central / Yikes! No way would I even touch that water.*

“Ah, another toe clipper; just saw one down there a few minutes ago,” I disclosed. *Why didn’t he tell me? Is my bana making this up for the audio recorder?*

“This one looked more like a whole-hand remover,” the older gent stated. “Toes would just be the hors d’oeuvres.”

“Swimmers beware!” I announced and then chuckled. *Do people really swim in this river? Ew! He’s just making conversation. I just know that he’s recording this. I smell a short story in the offing.*

“So, what do you two do?” he then inquired.

“I work in safety and write meta-real short stories,” I replied. *Meta-real? I bet that they’re littorally awful – literary offal.*

“Occupational-accident-inspired vignettes?” the seemingly interested man asked.

“They’re always OSHA- [Occupational Safety & Health Administration] compliant,” I assured. *What? Pass.*

“And, what about you, young lady?” he asked Monique.

"I keep our ship off the shoals," my wife divulged. "Someone has to pay attention to imminent danger. I'm now at the helm. I review the recordings and drafts before we stamp the *psecret psociety* logo on them." *A secret society? Recordings and drafts? Are they recording this conversation now? Time to leave these two to their own devices.*

"Well, nice meeting you two," he said. "Let's hope for a cloudless hole in the upper southwestern sky at 2:43."

"Fingers crossed," Monique replied.

"Toes, too," I added. *What a nutter.*

The man then tipped his khaki-colored, long-billed, no-team baseball cap and walked back towards the main trail. He turned left and continued north towards Interstate 126. *We're off to a lucky start. He was perfect. Good material. / I just know that hubby is already sizing up a short story. Glad that guy was nice, and not a creep or a thief. / Wonder where those two wind up. God only knows.*

We then started to walk back to the parking lot, as I wanted to get my wide-brimmed Australian field hat out of the car. The sun's unobstructed rays were already roasting my fair-skinned, 53-year-old face. *Man oh man, it's already an oven. / Hope I don't faint. Don't think I can walk too far in this heat.*

At the restroom area, there was now a young African American gentleman. Monique noticed that he had a box of eclipse glasses. She briskly walked up to him, as we didn't have any (none to be had in the Charlotte area).

"How much are the eclipse glasses?" she asked.

"They're free," he stated. "How many pairs do you need?"

"Just two for me and my husband," Monique replied.

"Here you go," the amiable man said as he handed the folded, very-dark-lensed, cardboard glasses to Monique.

"Yey!" she then exclaimed. "Thank you so much!"

"Let me give you a tip," I suggested to the very-dark-skinned park employee. "Is \$10 ok? Or, how about 20?"

He shook his head and his hands. "No, I'm not allowed to take any money." *An honest man. He's certainly not politician material. I bet that he does well in life. Hope so.*

“Are you absolutely sure?” I pleaded, wanting to at least pay for his lunch. *So very nice of him. Was expecting to pay \$40 for a pair, and we got them for free! Amazing. Credit Monique for asking. I’m sure I would’ve walked right on by.*

“Absolutely,” he firmly answered. “Enjoy the eclipse.”

“Ok, big thanks,” I reiterated.

“We will be able to watch it directly now,” Monique added. “Thanks again, sir.”

“You’re most welcome,” he replied.

Two minutes later we were at our humble automobile. I got my desired hat out of the hatch as Monique got some drinks and treats out of the cooler in the back seat.

“Got everything, asawa?” [wife in Cebuano and Tagalog]

“I think we’re all set, Agent 33.” *Agent 33. Yep, she knows that the switch is on; she knows that the little red light is lit.*

“And, we’re off, Agent 32!” I broadcasted. *Hope we get inside an air-conditioned place as soon as possible. I’m already sweating like a carabao. [Philippine water buffalo] / Hope we can avoid the bummerazzi. [sic]*

We then began our pedestrian journey towards Lady Street by exiting the parking lot onto Gist Street, walking south, making a left onto Blanding Street, rounding a right curve and finding ourselves on Williams Street. *Williams Street. That’s the outfit that did ‘Space Ghost Coast to Coast’. / What in the world is my bana thinking of now? ‘Adult Swim’?*

At Taylor Street, which was already a bit busy, we had to stop and wait to cross.

“I wonder how much of this traffic is eclipse-related. What would you guess, Agent 32?”

“Probably 55.55 percent, Agent 33.” *Why did she pick that repeating-digit percentage? / That should get his marble spinning for a few minutes.*

We safely crossed Taylor and continued walking down Williams for a block, arriving at a very busy downtown-bound Hampton Street. We turned left and walked beside a disused field up to Huger Street. There we crossed the wide one-way street. *Wow! Seven lanes. Can’t remember the last time I*

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