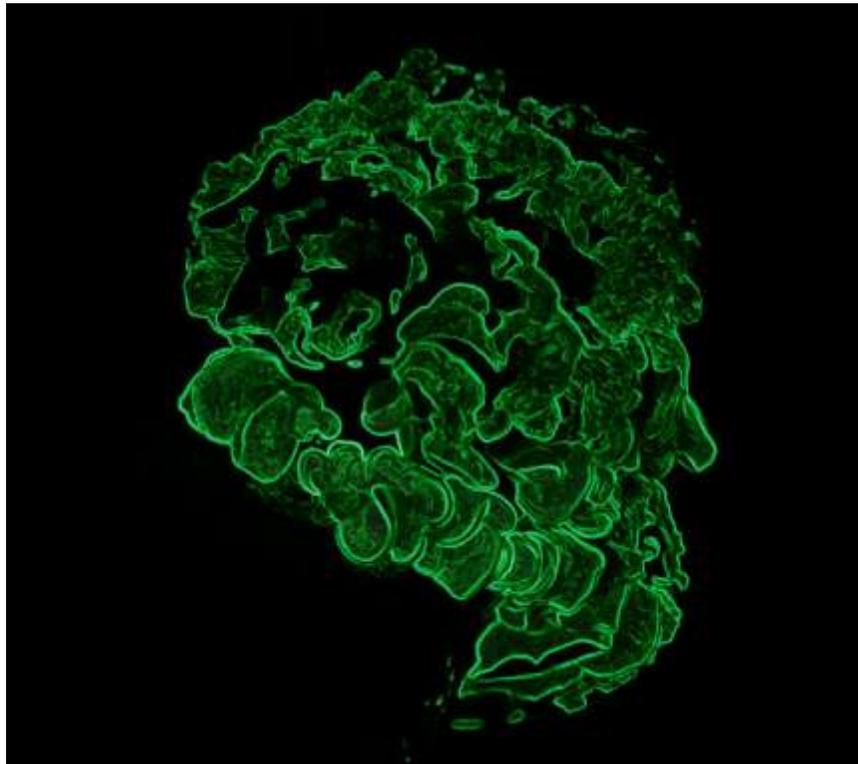


**an extra-pspatial pSecret pSociety tale**



**FOXFIRE** a novelette by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | MAY 2017

## **Foxfire**

by Mike Bozart  
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[[ Convention for the thoughts of characters in this novelette:

*Parkar's [me, Agent 33] thoughts are in this color/shade. /  
Monique's [my wife, Agent 32] thoughts are in this  
color/shade. / Aristotle's thought-quotes are in this color/  
shade.*

In mid-March of 2017, Monique, my forever-fascinating late-30-something Filipina wife (Agent 32), and I (Agent 33), decided to head up to Green Mountain RV Resort in the preliminary eastern range of the Blue Ridge Mountains (NC, USA) for a weekender at the family camper. It was 85 miles (137 km) from our residence in east Charlotte – only about a 100-minute drive if done nonstop; though, such was rare.

It was a sunny, yet quite chilly, Saturday morning in the Queen City as we motored westward on US 74 (Independence Expressway) in our gray, straight-drive with a chattering clutch, 2005 Kia Rio hatchback. Traffic was for the most part on the light side. We were soon passing the uptown towers on the Brookshire Freeway (Interstate 277 / NC 16). The city looked so new, and so quiet. *Almost looks like a to-scale balsa wood model – a life-size set for a Toho movie. When does Godzilla appear to wreak havoc? Which building gets smashed to bits first? / Wonder what my crazy kano [Filipino slang for American] husband is thinking now. No, don't even ask.*

We were making good time; we passed under Interstate 40 on US 321 at 10:24 AM. In 73 minutes we had gone 63 miles (101 km), passing through six traffic lights on the way: three in east Charlotte and three in north Gastonia. *We got up here a little early for lunch. Should have had a second cup of coffee and left the house a half-hour later. Really don't want to eat breakfast. / I'm about ready for some food. My stomach is gurgling. Wonder if he heard it.*

Twenty hillock-bounding minutes later, we were entering the sleepy foothills town of Lenoir. We took Harper Avenue NW

into the downtown area. We parked and started walking on West Avenue NW to pass some time. I spied an ice cream shop across the street.

“Want some ice cream, mahal?” [love in Tagalog] I asked my black-jacketed, black-panted, black-shoed, black-haired Visayan wife.

“Ah, sure, bana. [husband in Cebuano] One scoop will hold me over until we eat lunch.”

And with that reply, we crossed the deserted downtown lane. Corner Creamery was open. The ice cream was pretty good. *Much cheaper than Blowing Rock. / So tasty. Yum-yum.*

At 11:08 AM we were outside Piccolo’s Italian Restaurant. The ever-grinning, short, dark-haired owner greeted us at the door. He was very gregarious and quite friendly. As a bonus to our pizza order, he threw in a free two-liter (67.6 oz.) bottle of cola (though we’re not big soda drinkers). A near-life-size statue of Humphrey Bogart (Rick Blaine from *Casablanca*) kept watch over us as we ate the square slices of Chicago-style pie. (By the way, this place is full of interesting pop-culture artifacts, especially memorabilia related to the Windy City. It’s a must-stop-in if in the area.)

Next, we had a few craft beers at Howard’s Brewing (unfortunately, now defunct) around the corner on Boundary Street NW. The Mistletoe porter was distinctly divine. Strangely, the 30-ish, suds-slinging, tattooed, dirty-blonde-haired waitress mistook me for another red-haired dude that was in there last week. She was so dead-sure that I was that guy that I went along with it; I didn’t correct her. She told me

that I was funny last Saturday. *Hope my doppeldonger [sic] didn't say or do something foul. Doppeldonger, where did that coinage come from? What warped my mind?*

Fast-forward five hours. Monique and I are now on the wooden deck that wraps around two sides of the camper. We're relaxing on the rear (west) side that projects into the dense woods. As the sun begins to set, critters start to move about below, crunching down upon the carpet of dry fallen leaves. *Yikes! We're not alone. What is down there?*

I sipped on my tall goblet of Merlot as Monique nursed her demitasse of pink Zinfandel. It was a nice late winter evening with the temperature in the low 50s (Fahrenheit; 10 to 11° Celsius). *I think that we have enough propane for the night. Sure don't want to go out again. It won't get as cold as last night. / The heat had better not go off in the middle of the night like last time.*

"What kinds of animals are in this forest?" Monique asked, looking very concerned all of a sudden.

"Oh, there are many species, mahal. Way too many to enumerate."

"I mean, what threatening four-legged mammals might be out tonight?"

"Well, I'm sure that there are foxes, coyotes, wolves and bears up here." *Bears?!*

"Oi! Well, when it gets dark, I am going inside. And, I strongly suggest that you do likewise, Agent 33." *Agent 33?*

*Hmmm ... She suspects that I'm recording. / I just know that he'll write up this outing later. He might as well record and get the dialogue correct. His memory is so bad now. He can't remember two days ago.*

“Oh, honey, all of those animals that I just mentioned are afraid of humans.” *Not if they are hungry!*

“Ok, suit yourself, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] But, this pinay [a Philippine woman] is going inside in ten minutes.” *She's spooked.*

“You don't want to savor the sylvan gloaming with me, lovely Agent 32?” *Sylvan gloaming? He's already sauced.*

“No, I'll let you have it all to yourself, dear.”

The softly spreading drapery of darkness settled on the 80% hardwood / 20% conifer forest. It was so tranquil. The campground's year-rounders were already in for the night. *Sure is peaceful up here tonight. / It's so quiet that it's creepy. Feels like a horror movie setting. It's about time to go inside.*

Then I suddenly noticed a greenish glow off in the woods. It was probably about 100 feet (30 meters) away. *Did someone smear the contents of a lightstick on a tree?*

I stood up and pointed. “Monique, do you see that greenish glow down there?”

“Yes!” she screamed. “Well, that's it. I'm going inside now. There's a *mumu* [phantom in Tagalog] down there.” She

then got up from her lawn chair and began walking towards the front door, where she stopped and turned towards me. “How long will you be staying out here, 33?”

“Maybe for a little while, 32. I want to check out that eerie glow. I want to know what it is.” *Oh, boy. I just knew it. Men!*

“Ok, that’s your choice. But, I’m locking the door, bana.”

“That’s fine, my extra-cautious wife. I’ll knock in a three-four-three pattern when I return.” *What?!*

“That’s a losing formation, Parkaar.” *Huh? Oh, a pun on soccer setups. Very clever of her.*

“Ok, it will be four-four-two, Monique.” *That’s better.*

“Stay safe. Bye. Oh, do you have your cell phone?”

“Yes, I’ve got it.”

“Is it charged?”

“Uh, let me check.” I fumbled for my phone in my pants pocket. Once I had it extracted, I checked the battery gauge. “Ok, it’s at 67%. All good for at least two days, mahal.”

“Ok, see you later, Mr. Nocturnal Explorer.”

“Ok, dear. Just text me if you get scared.”

“I most certainly will. And, you do the same, bana.”

I blew her a kiss. She returned fire and stepped inside.

Next, I heard her successfully lock the door. Then I walked off the deck to the asphalt parking space. I checked our car. It was all locked-up. The just-up-the-street neighbor's camper still had their tiny, white, camper-outlining Christmas lights up; they were on and blithely twinkling away in silence. *They probably got tired of putting them up and taking them down. Well, in another three months, they will have been deemed to have set up their lights early.*

I then walked around to the other side of our Denali-branded camper. A faint deer path curled to the left and descended into the woods. Soon I was walking past the deck posts. Moonlight filtered through the gaps between the deck planks, thirteen feet (four meters) overhead. *Good. We've got some natural illumination tonight. Forgot the working flashlight again. The one in the camper has dead batteries. Bad planning. Par for the curse. [sic]*

I looked off in the distance, moving my head from side to side so that I could relocate that strange green glow. It didn't take that long, as there were hardly any leaves yet on the deciduous trees. *Ah, there it is. Looks to be less than a foot (30.5 cm) in height. Looks like something right out of a sci-fi flick. Or, a horror movie? Hope not.*

Small fallen tree limbs and twigs crackled under foot as I moved towards my target. I heard small animals – probably squirrels and other rodents – scurrying away from me. Then I heard a much larger mammal walking – steadily advancing. *Is that a wolf? Darn! Forgot the damn pepper spray. Let's grab a nice-size rock and a thick stick. Well, just in case.*

I stopped walking and was very still. The unseen animal – whatever it was – kept progressing at the same, slow, measured pace up a small ridge off to my right. It then seemed to be going away from me. And, ten seconds later, this was confirmed, as the sound of the animal's steps diminished and faded away. *Whew! I bet that was a wolf. Or, I guess that it could have been a deer. Maybe a wolf tracking a sick or injured deer. It probably picked up the scent. Canis stalkerazzi. [sic]*

Everything was quiet again. I looked up at the sky. Some thin cirrus clouds formed elongated zones for the emerging stars. *Two stars in zone 4. Five stars in zone 2. One in 3. Three in 1. Clean, lubricate, protect. 3-in-One Oil. 1894. Originally for bicycles. Wonder if it is still produced. [It is, but now by the WD-40 Company.] What a strange universe. Cue The Man from RavCon. What could it all mean? Don't think that I'm smart enough to know. Maybe one only knows in death. If ever.*

I restarted my gradual trek through the moonlit eastern North American forest. The green glow was now only about thirty feet (nine meters) ahead. *What in the world is that? Looks like it's attached to the tree. Need to take a pic of it and show it to Monique.*

Sixteen seconds later, after stepping over a wide-girth, wind-topped oak tree, I was looking at the green luminous glow, which was right at eyelevel. *Ah, I know what this is. It was in one of the pocket field guides.*

The source of the soft green light was actually foxfire – a type of bioluminescent fungi. The layered clamshell-like growth was about nine inches (23 cm) tall by about six inches (15 cm) wide by two inches (5 cm) deep. It kind of looked like the profile of an ancient philosopher from Athens or Rome. I snapped a photo with my LG semi-smartphone. *Well, this old birch tree is most definitely not long for this world. Massive decay is already underway. Wonder why this particular wood-reducing fungus glows in the dark. Maybe it's to warn nighttime foragers. 'Hey, don't even think of eating me! – I taste really bad; in fact, I may even be poisonous to you!' Hmmm ... Wonder how bad it actually tastes. Is it really poisonous? Never saw this listed in the toxic category in any of my mushroom books. Ah, maybe just a little nibble. Oh, why not? You only live once, sport. And, you only die once, too. Well, maybe. Who really knows? Yep, here goes.*

I broke off a small piece and placed it in my mouth. I bit down on it lightly and wrinkled my face, not knowing exactly what to expect, but anticipating a rancid flavor. The texture was fairly firm; the taste was a bit acrid, yet endurable. There was actually a not-totally-disagreeable aftertaste. No, it certainly wasn't a tasty prize-winning morel; however, I didn't have too much trouble getting it down the hatch. *Wonder how long it will take to feel any effects. My stomach is not completely full now. Last ate over six hours ago. Will there be any effects? Probably inert, I would bet. But, if there is something neural coming down the tracks, we're close enough to the camper if internal fireworks start going off. It's not like we're eight miles (13 km) out. Yet. Ha! Well, while we're waiting, we can send the foxfire pic to Monique. We for*

*me. I sure seem to love 1<sup>st</sup> person plural these days. At least I'm not down to 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural. That's probably game-over time. Broughton [Mental Hospital of Morganton, NC] calling. Hello? Anyone there? They are not here.*

This is the text that I included with the photo of the foxfire:

This is what the green glow is, honey. It's called foxfire. It's actually a fungus. I'm fine. Nice little walk. Heading back shortly. How are you doing at base camperoni? [sic]

Monique replied a minute later.

I'm doing fine, my intrepid Agent 33. Just missing you. Get back here soon, Parkaarazzi. [sic] Mahal kita, asawa ['I love you, wife' in Tagalog]

And then I replied.

Are you sure that you don't want to see the mysterious green glow in person, seductive sexarita? [sic]

Her answer came back quickly.

Very sure. See you soon. Stay safe, Fungarazzi! [sic]

I looked at the foxfire again. I let my left index finger touch the cool fungal mass. And then, a thought suddenly blasted into my head, whence I have no idea. *The energy of the mind is the essence of life. / That's Aristotle! The pride of Stagira hit a home run there. No doubt that they cheered him all over Chalcidice. Look at that parade. Standing room only. An errant ball rolls down the dusty promenade. The growing applause. Well, maybe celebrated in the upper echelons only. The bright Mediterranean sun in their faces. A light onshore breeze. What a moment in time. It was their*

*present. It was all going to be Greece forever. Wow! My thinking sure has ticked up a notch after munching on that lustrously verdant elf ear. I'm channeling a famous ancient. And, what a famous ancient to channel. What a past present for this present! Wonder what lies ahead.*

I pulled my finger back. My brain flashed. *Yes, that's a famous quote by Aristotle alright. Or, was it by Plato? Wait. Socrates? Or, was it by Pliny the Elder? Or, the Younger? Or, the history-passed-over bummer? Hmmm ... Not absolutely sure if it was Aristotle now. Doubt creeps into those forgotten crevices. And, how it expands so very quickly. Uh, could I utilize a 50-50 on that one, Regis? Shouldn't have daydreamed so much in that 11<sup>th</sup>-grade World History class. [Independence High School, Charlotte/Mint Hill] Mr. Carpenter would be disappointed. Ah, he knew I wasn't going anywhere noteworthy. Just have them know that it was Greece before it was Rome, and move them along. Wonder if Mr. Carpenter and his Indian wife are still alive? Guess they would be around 70 or so now. Time sure flew out that classroom window. Fast, in retrospect.*

My left index finger again drifted back to the foxfire. It was as if it was being drawn by an invisible, irresistible force. And then, I saw it: It was the right-side profile of Aristotle in the gnarly fungal growth. In that very same moment, another ancient thought was flung into my 21<sup>st</sup> century mind-space. *No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness.* / *Ok, that settles it; that was definitely Aristotle. And now, the famous Greek is existing in some ever-after as a tree fungus. Well, at least for me at this point in time. Boy,*

*this is so very weird. Uberifically [sic] bizarre. Hope there is more to come.*

As I again felt the edge of the fungus, another quote by Aristotle shot into my mind. *Thinking is the top bliss and joy in life.* / *Yes, indeed. It truly is, old boy. It separates us from other lifeforms. Even intraspecies. You really nailed that one, you sly syllogist. Couldn't have said it better myself. A five-star profundity there. The cog in cognition. How many quotes remain in this session? When does this special effect wear off? Hope it doesn't last until dawn. Don't want to be awake all night.*

My left index finger then brushed the gills on the underside of another foxfire cap. I now realized that I would only receive the profound quotes when I made physical contact with the glowing fungus; a tactile connection was necessary. And then, shazam! *The ideal man bears the accident of life with dignity and grace, making the best of the circumstances.* / *Another goal scored there, Mr. A. Top-self quality. Deft delivery. World-class material all day long – and all night long, too. Oh, so sorry that you are alive to read this. Ha-ha. Such dark hilarity. Never knew that Aristotle was so witty. Did we really think that after Plato it would just be pasty platitudes? 'Only the dead have seen the end of war.' Perhaps Plato's best. Over two millennia out, and it's still as true today as it was on day one. So, when's the next war? Just hang tight; it will be here before you know it, bunky. Will it settle things? Sure, it will. Well, up until the lead-up to the next war. Wonder what Aristotle thought when he heard his mentor say that. / *It is not enough to win a war; it is more important to organize the peace.* / *Wow! Aristotle replies.**

*This is something else. Let's keep this open channel open. And flowing. Further. Dredge ahead at full speed. Deepen all ancillary canals. Yeah, that's looking very nice, Ed. Ok, and what is your feeling about art, Aristotle? / The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance. / So very well-stated, sir! Bravo! Such a prescient remark. Way ahead of your time. Ok, I am sure that you had to deal with critics for your bold statements, as did Socrates and Plato. Ahem ... Well now, Aristotle, what do you have to say about criticism? / There is only one way to avoid criticism: Do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing. / I love it! I'll give you a standing ovation for that. Pure genius. How did I never hear or read any of these gems? Maybe because I had my head buried in nowhere. [sic] Any views on knowledge and wisdom, father of Western thought? / Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom. / Wow! Never heard that maximum maxim. I should get out of this century more often. My apologies. Well, I know that I am just a bloke of average intelligence. Ok, maybe I'm a 7.25 out of 10 on my keenest day. So, knowing that, what should I do? Try to get into some degree-mill online graduate school? Or, search for Socrates' hemlock? / The more you know, the more you know you don't know. / A paradoxical aphorism there. And, couldn't agree more. Carefully build your unique ladder to get out of your dark dungeon. Make sure that all of the rungs are strong and secure. Then carefully climb your ladder to the top of the wall where that little window is – the one that you've been staring at for years; yes, that one which promises a wondrous tomorrow. Then, once on that stone sill, take a look around. Ah! You were actually in a room atop a tower. And, it's a long, long, oh-so-very-long way down.*

*You're stuck. Ok, that's probably not the best example, is it? / Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all. / Need to do both. Ok, we got it. What about hope? / Hope is a waking dream. / Monique will like that one. But, not an Ambien® sleepwalking episode, right? Sorry, you've never heard of it. Let's just move along. Hmmm ... What would my wife like to ask the eternal mind of Aristotle? Any adages regarding friends and enemies? / The antidote for fifty enemies is one friend. / She'll like that one. Yes, she will. You see – or maybe you can't – there's this mega-gossippy pinay group in Charlotte. Well, really all over the globe. We refer to them as Group Z. They're a rather toxic ensemble, saturated in self-loathing. Their prime desire is to pull others into their mire. My wife avoids them at all cost. / A friend to all is a friend to none. / So true. She'll like that one, too. How about one more on friends? Am I being greedy? If so, cancel my request. / A friend is a second self. / Nice. Score! Another one in the back of the net. You haven't missed from the spot yet, old guy. Did you ever wonder what life would be like 2,300 years later? Well, most of the problems of your time are still here, only magnified. / Republics decline into democracies, and democracies degenerate into despotisms. / Not so optimistic, huh? Not a big fan of one person, one vote? Dolts are easily manipulated by crafty politicians. Was that your thinking? Mob rule by those who eschew school? Well, you just may have had a functioning crystal ball back there. Where did you leave it? Under the Parthenon? How did all of those archaeologists not unearth it? You know, you could get a lot for it on Ebay. What's Ebay? Buying and selling on an electronic screen. Stuff moving from A to B. Money moving*

*invisibly. Fees making some very rich. I bet you could figure out the whole scheme in an hour. / Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work. / I agree with you yet again. Too bad that so many are unhappy with their jobs now, Big A. Can I call you Big A? I'll take that as a yes. / Whoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god. / Well, I spent many years in near-solitude. I'm certainly no god, or demigod. Thus, maybe I was a wild beast for a while. So, you weren't one for the ascetic lifestyle. Were you in the 'an idle mind is the devil's workshop' camp? / We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit. / I actually think that I've heard that one before, A. I believe that it was at a motivational seminar. / It is the mark of an educated mind to entertain a thought without accepting it. / Well, we certainly will consider any thought, even if for only a millisecond. Yes, even the vile hate-filled thoughts make us wonder about possible abuse, slighting and neglect. / Through discipline comes freedom. / Yeah, I agree with you yet again, A. So many today – in America at least – think that they can achieve their goals by irregular, undisciplined half-efforts. Must have a regimen. And, one must stick with it. Follow-through. It seems that so few have patience for that anymore. It's hedonism to the max now, A. Gratification cannot be delayed one nanosecond. Not sure how this ends. Not good, I would wager.*

And then, my cell phone chirped. I had received a text message from my wife.

Are you ok?

I replied immediately.

Yes, all is going quite well, mahal.

What are you doing?

Oh, just getting some good thoughts from the Big A – future story material.

The Big A? What or who is that? Please don't tell me that you are communicating with a fungus-infested tree, Agent 33.

Ha! How did you know, astute Agent 32?

I know your brain better than you do. It's time to wrap it up and come back to the camper before a bear eats you.

It's all good, even if the wood is rotten.

The clock has started, Parkaar. No admittance after five minutes.

Ok, I am heading back now. See you very soon. Oh, please turn the outside light on. Salamat. [thanks in Tagalog]

I touched the foxfire one last time for the night. *Wicked men obey out of fear; good men, out of love. / Yeah, no doubt, Aristotle. No doubt, whatsoever. Well, I've got to go now. Oh, before I go, might you have one more apothegm that you could serve up in an instant? / Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies. / That's good stuff there – a most righteous one to leave on. I'll share that with my wife. She will really like that one. Well, until, if, and/or ever ... again. It's certainly been rather grand. And, most unforgettable. Give my regards to the others, if there are any in this hyper-state. Gia sou. [goodbye in Greek]*

The walk back to the camper was incident-free: No animals – or humans – attacked me. I didn't hear anything, either.

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