

Tales from the Virginias

an octet of short stories

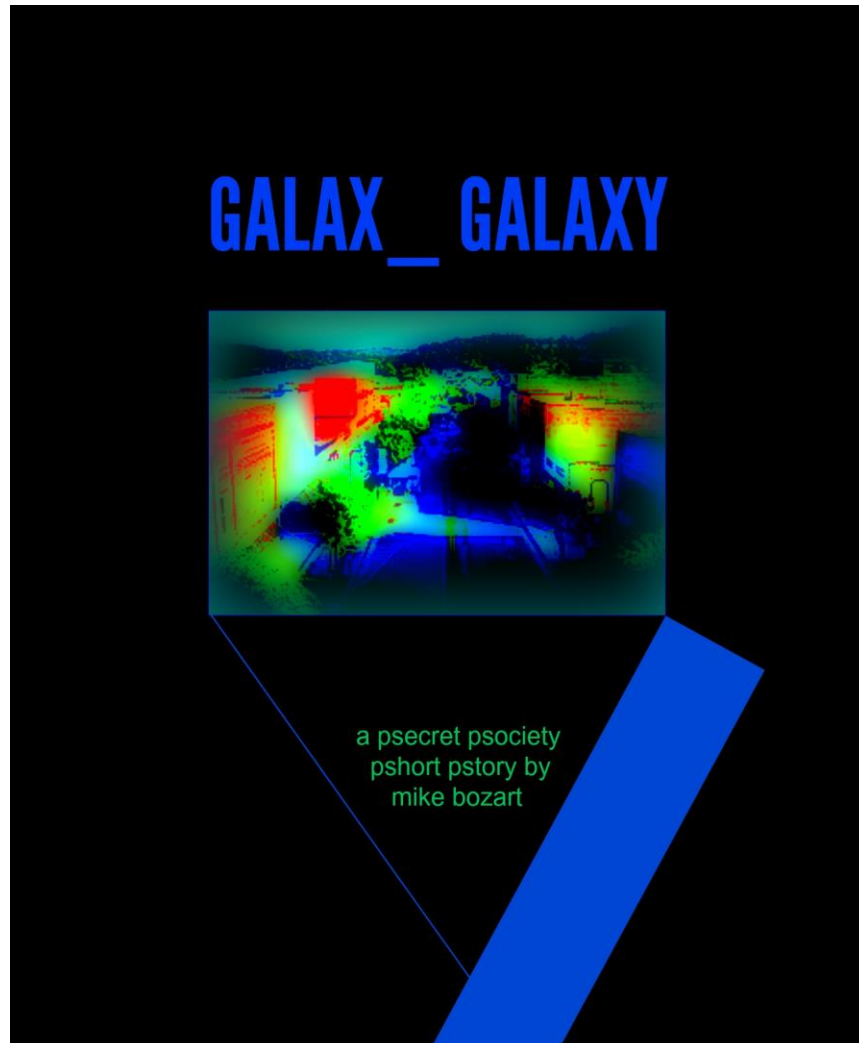
by Mike Bozart

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Table of Contents

i	<u>Galax[] Galaxy</u>
ii	<u>Charlie West</u>
iii	<u>Fries or Freeze</u>
iv	<u>Gallivanting in Galax</u>
v	<u>The Race</u>
vi	<u>The Cipher</u>
vii	<u>A Blue Whale of a Tale</u>
viii	<u>Bridge Day</u>

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



GALAX_GALAXY

It was just another town in the Blue Ridge ...

by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | October 2012 (rev. August 2018)

As we exited the Family Dollar store on West Jefferson Street, Agent 32 spotted him. He was there – shirtless – in a second-floor, curtain-less, half-open sash window. Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) watched him gyrating and waving his hands while on his cell phone. He was a well-bronzed lad, probably in his mid-20s.

“He looks like this town’s lead hipster,” Monique remarked.

“Yeah, he sure does,” I replied. “Maybe he will be the next Jack Kerouac, and we can say that we saw him here when he was ...”

“When he was a drug-addled specimen in a window,” Monique stated as she began to laugh.

“Well, who knows, 32? Let’s not prematurely discharge him.”

“Yeah, you’re right, 33. Who knows? Let’s not sell him short.”

“I love how you call me 33 when my digital audio recorder is on.”

“Your digital audio recorder is always on,” Agent 32 retorted.

We continued walking down the street, heading north towards Washington Street. It was a perfect fall Saturday evening, when one thinks back to previous October evenings. *I wonder if there’s any magic tonight in this little mountain town. What psychic goodies await? Anything? Any compounding waves?*

Off in the distance, around a corner, the faint screams and cheers from a Little League Baseball game on Calhoun Street could be heard through the autumn air as the sun began to set. My mind sailed away with the invigorating zephyr. *I wonder if he saw the excerpted copy of ‘Gold, a summer story’ [a novel by yours truly] that I slid under his apartment door earlier in the day, when Agent 32 was asleep. Was that what got him so agitated on the phone? Or, was he just mad at his girlfriend for running late and missing the big weed connection? I bet he’s dating the minister’s daughter. The bad boy de ville. [sic] Yep, he’s Billy Bad-Azz.*

“What are you thinking about, Agent 33?”

“Oh, nothing much, Monique.”

“Some things never change.” Monique guffawed.

I joined in on the laughter. “It sure is a perfect fall night. I sure could go for some Asian food.”

“Yey!” Monique exclaimed. “Me, too.” As a Filipina, she loved her rice-based dishes.

“Hey, I know where a Chinese restaurant is. I saw it on the way in to town.”

“Ok, lead the way, Parkaar.” [my ailing alias]

“Nicely pronounced, 32. Just call me that in the restaurant. You know, just in case.”

“Why, of course, 33. I’ve memorized Ernie’s game plan.”

“Oh?” I asked with a raised right eyebrow.

Monique smiled. “Epicably,” [*sic*] she then said.

“Epicably? Is that a real word, 32?”

“A sure-real word.”

We turned right onto West Center Street, went one block, and turned right on North Main Street. Soon we were under a sign that read: ||**Canton**||

We entered the antechamber, and waited to be seated. I cleared my throat, and a middle-aged Asian lady appeared in black-and-white attire. She said that we could sit anywhere.

We went to a booth near the salad bar and sat down opposite each other. A few minutes later, she returned to take our order. I told her that we would both like the dinner buffet. She motioned to the stack of plates and went back to the kitchen.

Agent 32 then jumped up and began to load her plate with steamed white rice and brown noodles. She was hungry; we hadn’t eaten since Charlotte. She was going to get her money’s worth of carbs.

After five minutes of nearly nonstop chowing down, I began the conversation as a fly alighted on the high ceiling.

“How long do you think this place has been here?”

“No idea, Parkaar, but the food is good. Yum-yum.”

An older Chinese man, perhaps the/an owner, overheard us, and told me that the restaurant was twenty years old. I thanked him for the info. Then the fly flew away with the knowledge gained.

Right after that, a Chinese-American-appearing high-school girl walked in with her Caucasian American friends. Apparently, she

was the owners' daughter. They made some small talk. Then the girl whispered something to her dad while shielding her mouth with her hand so that we couldn't lip-read what she said. *The winning lottery number?* Soon she and her teenage entourage departed.

After a round of desserts, we paid up and left. We walked north on Main Street. I glanced down East Grayson Street. *Rex Theatre. Hmmm ... Rex means king in Latin. I wonder how it got that name. Rex de Grayson? Rex de Galax? Rexlax? [sic]*

Then Agent 32 suddenly spoke. "What are you thinking?"

"See that movie theater down there, the Rex Theatre?"

"Yes ..."

"Well, rex is Latin for king."

"Yeah, so what? You know, Rex is a common American male name. Remember Rex Chapman for the old [Charlotte] Hornets?"

"Yes, I do. And, well, that's really all I was thinking."

"I had to ask." She sighed and chuckled.

"And, now you know." I had a laugh.

Agent 32 gave me a wry grin and giggled a final time as I heard a motorized mechanism approaching. An old, nearly dead car limped down the street, lagging behind us. We turned around, and it was him – the young hipster who was in the window earlier.

He kept looking straight ahead with his blonde hair all a mess. Then he sped off from the immediate twilight towards the quickly descending drape of darkness. His old, green sedan disappeared around a corner. *What an improbable loon. Every small town has at least one.*

We continued walking, but not talking. We climbed West Washington Street up to Knights Inn. Our motel room was on the upper level. It had an awesome view of the Galax bowl. (Galax sits in a valley, surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains.)

When we arrived, we took it all in for a few minutes. *What a nice, quaint, peaceful little town in Appalachia.*

"An incredible Blue Ridge scene, isn't it, Monique?"

"It most certainly is," she replied as she peered out towards the Merlot-wine-red, zigzag-bumpy horizon line. "What's that noise?!"

There was some commotion at a hotel room down from ours.

“Probably just some revelers, already loaded on booze, 32.”

We decided to duck inside our motel room for the night. The number on the door: 129. *His license plate ended with 129. Strange coincidence?*

I flipped the TV on and found a Major League Baseball playoff game in progress.

“Ah, the [San Francisco] Giants aren’t dead yet, Monique.”

“Ok, 33, you watch it. I’m going to sleep.” Monique rolled over, facing away from the TV’s beam of electromagnetic radiation.

I turned the volume way down and Monique quickly fell asleep with a pillow between her legs. The wound was still sore. She had been bit by a vicious dog on her right calf during the last mission: an east Charlotte zero-run. A complete non-leaguer.

Then someone passed by the front window of our room. I sensed that they were lingering. I brushed the curtain aside. It was him – Billy Bad-Azz – just sitting in his decrepit automobile, windows open, just smiling. *What the fawk! [sic]*

I went outside to confront him. I decided to ask him an open-ended question, just to gauge his mindset.

“How much do you know about the plot?” I asked him, trying to maintain a straight face.

He quickly dispensed a reply. “What plot? I don’t know about any plot. However, I do have an incredible device that will change your life ... forever. Literally and literarily.” *And littorally?* He coughed. “Want to see it?”

“Why, sure.”

Before retrieving it, he went on to tell me that this particular device could extract thought fragments. I was skeptical, very skeptical. He said that the range was up to two miles (3.2 km), and that it was directional. He was eager to give me a demonstration.

He then disembarked from his semi-ancient (late ‘70s) Toyota Corolla and walked towards the white picket fence with a small, dark-brown case in hand. At the precipice of the upper parking lot, he took the device out of the case. He aimed his contraption, which looked like a phaser [sic] out of a ‘60s Star Trek episode, at the town of Galax below. He then handed me a set of headphones and gave me a nefarious, shark-like grin.

“Man, when you put these headphones on, your mind is gonna be a-blown, dude. Über-blown. Totally blown away.”

This wasted lad was a baked-like-a-cake, closing-in-on-some-perceived-nirvana, glidingly giddy Gilbert Giddy-up. [of Hardee's fast-food fame] *Maybe he's on pills. Which ones? Oh, let's just play along. Maybe something short-story-worthy will present itself. I seem to be out of ideas as of late.*

"Is that so?" I asked, as I wondered what in the world I was getting ready to experience.

"I guarantee it. Brace yourself for localized thoughticle [sic] overload." *Thoughticle?*

I slid the headphones on. I started to hear little bursts of audio bleeps. At first they were entirely incomprehensible. Then he made an adjustment, a fine-tuning, I suppose. Discernible words were then heard in various male and female voices in whispery tones.

Well, without further ado, here's the exact transcript of the thoughts that I heard that fateful night in Galax:

[crackling noises] ... only five years to go; yep, just sixty worthless months to cross off on the calendars; I won't be that old; I'll still have a reason to live ... her ass is so soft; can't wait to have some rough sex with her; it's going to be great; I can tell she's the type; I saw her ass-crack tattoo ... I bet Daryl has a big one; gosh, I hope so; a nice, big, rock-hard sausage dog ... tomorrow will be fun, maybe too much fun ... Mark always gets what he wants, every damn time ... I hate how she does that ... I know Eunice is jealous of me; she is always focused on me; she always has been, ever since 8th grade ... I've got to get him to pay me somehow; need to put the screws to him ... her husband is so clueless; he'll never know ... well, everyone steals a little from their employer ... I can't believe what Steve did last night, but then, maybe I can; he's so shady, so sneaky ... Ed will be hungover and completely worthless tomorrow morning; he drinks all the time now; he's a complete alcoholic, just like his dad ... I've got to escape from this nowhere town; nothing is going to happen for me here; maybe I should go in the service ... the wheel is bent again; just my luck ... the house is finally paid off; now we have some breathing room, but I'll bet she finds a way to spend it ... I just know that Earl has a meth[amphetamine] lab in that vacant house by the railroad tracks; why else is he over there half the day? ... she got the job at the bank; she'll probably try to steal money or fuck the manager, or maybe both; I know that girl, totally devious ... Johnny is back to messing with that little whore; I knew he would go back to her; what a total scumbag ... another goddam leak; the plumbing in this house sucks! ... who could be calling at this hour? ... no, no, no; not another annoying-as-hell political robo-call! ... I've got to do something with my life, and soon ... we could go to Roanoke tomorrow; I'd really like that, but she probably doesn't

want to go ... I'm so sick of her meddling sister ... my Facebook account has been hacked; Steve probably did it; I really hate that douchebag! ... I swear, it feels like my thoughts are being monitored. <click> [silence]

I took the headphones off. *Unbelievable! What a piece of hardware. We'll be rich! Or, World War III will start by dawn.*

"This is one priceless piece of hardware you have here, man," I announced as I turned around. But, he was gone! I had become so engrossed in these captured random thoughts from the valley below that I had failed to hear him drive off. *Why did he leave something so valuable with me? Does he have more of them? Is this some kind of test run?*

I walked back inside our motel room with the thought-extracting device under my shirt. Agent 32 was still sound asleep. I thought about waking her, but then decided to show her this novel toy tomorrow morning. *Ah, just let the princess sleep.*

I looked at the device under the bathroom light. It seemed to be completely housed in plastic. It must have been glued together; I didn't see any screws. I turned it over. On the bottom it read:

Galax_ Galaxy thought interceptor. 2011 model. Only works in Galax, VA, USA. Never use while a microwave oven is in operation in the same room. Never point at self. Not responsible for content received by this device. End of warnings and legal disclaimers. This lower area intentionally left blank. Do not fill in blank.

I cautiously placed the thought-intercepting gun under the top of the mattress, beneath the pillow on my side, and crawled into bed beside Monique. *Hope it's safe to sleep with this thing under my head. Will it interfere with my shunt? Maybe sleep on the left side to be safe.*

Sleep came fast, but was unsettled. I awoke several times during the night, and then one more time at 6:06 AM to find Agent 32 making some instant coffee. She had her mug of water in the microwave. *She sure got up early. Maybe she wants to get an early start on today's hike.*

Then I quickly thought back to what it said on the bottom of the thought extractor – the microwave-oven-operating-in-the-same-room warning. And then I remembered where the device was, and felt the switch with my left hand. *Is this on or off? Not sure.*

I saw the numerical countdown on the microwave oven display at 1:29. Then there was a big, bright-green flash that lit up the whole room. Monique's face was pure shock.

And, just as I tried to say: "Stop the microwave, Monique!" all quickly faded to black ... and all was silent ... and without thought.

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



Charlie West by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | JANUARY 2017

Charlie West
by Mike Bozart
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A mild, sunny, halcyon December Thursday morning in eastern North America found my Filipina wife Monique (Agent 32) and I (Agent 33) in our gray 2005 Kia Rio hatchback, motoring northward up Interstate Highway 77 (aka I-77), nearing the North Carolina – Virginia state line. We were going to rent a car at CLT (the Charlotte airport), but when Advantage tried to slide in hundreds of dollars in additional charges, we politely declined the disadvantage. The cheerful counter clerk then candidly informed us that they had to do such, as some locals were not returning the cars. I thought: *What the hell! Who are they allowing to drive off in their almost-new cars? Don't they do any screening?*

The little 4-cylinder engine chugged up the Blue Ridge escarpment. A few miles into Virginia, a breathtaking view of the North Carolina piedmont opened up on the right.

“Nice view, isn't it, Agent 32?” *Agent 32? He's already in record mode. Unbelievable.*

“It certainly is, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] But, please keep your eyes on the road. Slow down! We're coming up fast on that creeping truck.”

I let off the gas pedal a little. An 18-wheeler was crawling up the mountainside. I then passed the semi on the left and settled in the center lane. *I wonder if Monique is getting hungry. I bet she is. She didn't eat any breakfast. She's going hypoglycemic, I can tell.*

“Want to stop in Wytheville for lunch?” I asked her.

Monique spied a sign. “Is that near Fort Chiswell?”

“Fort Jizzwell?” [sic] *He said that for the recorder.*

“Gosh, that's so vulgar, 33!”

“Frank [the late, great Agent 107, a dark-haired Caucasian dude who kind of looked like Bryan Ferry, circa 1975] and I called it that. We always got a chuckle out of it.” *They thought that was funny? Men!*

“I guess it's a male thing. Anyway, how far from Wytheville are we?”

“Just twenty-seven minutes out, mahal.” [love in Tagalog]

“Ok, let's stop there.”

Soon we were sitting in the Appleby's (an American chain restaurant) on East Main Street (US 11). A very courteous African American waitress took our order. I looked over at

the bar, and remained fixated on it. *So, that's where Frank would go on Saturday nights, searching for new love.*

Monique noticed my incessant staring at the horseshoe-shaped bar. "Did you meet another agent at that bar, 33? Tell the truth. Don't lie."

"No, nothing like that, 32. It's where Frank would ply the local lasses a decade ago, looking for a compatible date. He told me that he would be doing ok until the girl found out that he hadn't gone to the local high school." *What?!*

"Really?" Monique asked with a stunned expression.

"That's what he told me, 32. He also said that he was at a further disadvantage, as he wasn't a ball-cap wearer, much less one to don one backwards."

"Did Frank drink alcohol at that bar, 33?"

"Yes, even though he never really liked doing such. He told me that he would nurse a Heineken for two hours, so as to not seem odd. I know that he would have loved to fire up a big bowl [of marijuana] instead."

"Oh yes, I'm sure of that, Agent 33."

Our waitress then returned with our food. Monique had a grilled chicken and rice dish. I just had a bowl of French onion soup. We ate without speaking; we were famished. *This soup is fairly tasty. I'd give it a 7.777777.*

I paid our bill thirteen minutes later. Under the tip I left the waitress a coupon for a free download of *Gold, a summer story* (my 2013 e-novel). Upon exiting, the ever-smiling waitress suddenly said: "Thank you, agents!" *Wow! I guess she overheard us. / I wonder if she will friend-request psecret psociety on Facebook. She seems game to it.*

Our journey continued up I-77. We were soon approaching the Big Walker Mountain Tunnel. I checked to make sure that the headlights were on.

Monique saw the tunnel's name next to the portal. "Is there a Little Walker Mountain Tunnel, too, Parkaar?"

"I don't think so, Monique."

"Then, why the *Big*, 33?"

"It's probably a tall tale, 32, with a short ending."

"I just had to ask." She shook her head and sighed.

I had a quick laugh. She then smiled.

Soon we emerged from the northwest portal of the eight-tenths-of-a-mile-long (1.29 km) underground vehicular passage. Nineteen miles (30.58 km) later, we were entering the East River Mountain Tunnel.

“When we emerge from this one, 32, we’ll be in WV.” [West Virginia]

When we exited the second tunnel, Monique made a declaration: “That last tunnel is longer than the first one, 33.”

“How do you know this to be true, perspicacious Agent 32? Did you time our passages through both of them? But, what if our average speeds were different?”

“No, I didn’t time them, Agent 33.”

“Then how do you know that the latter tunnel is longer than the former?”

“It’s a psecret, [*sic*] 33, with a silent p. That last tunnel was a shade over a mile. [1.61 km] Am I right, Mr. Geo-Almanac?” [*sic*] *Mr. Geo-Almanac? What?*

“Well, yes, you are correct, 32. The East River Mountain Tunnel is 1.025 miles [1.65 km] long.”

The conversation ceased until we rolled past Flat Top Mountain. *I wonder if she remembers that sledding day.*

“Remember when we went sledding next to the Winterplace Ski Resort? Agent 66 [my son] was with us.”

“Not sure that I recall that, 33.” *What is he on about now?*

“We also tried snowboarding. I think that I made it 70 yards [64 meters] before falling. Agent 66 won, however, as he went 100 yards [91.44 meters] before toppling.”

“Oh, yes; I remember it now. We spent the night in Wytheville. You didn’t want to drive all the way back to Charlotte.” *Probably had roid rage.*

We stopped and paid at the Ghent Toll Plaza. Twenty-four minutes later, we were rolling into the Pax Toll Plaza to pay another two dollars.

“Is this the last one?” Monique asked.

“No, there is one more before Charleston, 32.”

“What do they use the toll money for, 33?”

“Well, initially it was used to pay off the cost of road construction. But, now it’s used for road maintenance, I

suppose. Once a highway goes toll, it rarely reverts back to being a freeway. State governments like that steady stream of revenue too much.”

“I’m glad you have cash in your wallet, 33. They don’t accept debit or credit cards.”

“Yeah, I researched this turnpike yesterday, 32.”

“That figures.” She giggled.

After another twenty-four minutes, we were clearing the Chelyan Toll Plaza. Interstate 64-77 then flanked the teal-green Kanawha River all the way to Charleston. *The river is wider than I thought. / I bet that water is cold.*

When I saw the golden dome of the Capitol Building, I pointed it out (to the left) for Monique.

“Well, after 271 miles, [436 km] we’re finally here, Agent 32.”

“Where is our hotel?”

“Just a mile away,” I said as I veered for Exit 100.

Soon we were parking behind the Charleston Capitol Hotel, an older nine-floor inn on Washington Street that was in the process of being upfitted to become a Wyndham Garden Hotel. Our room – 301 – was definitely pre-remodel: The now-adhesion-less wallpaper had waves in it. But, other than that, it was a decent room for the money.

Monique unpacked our luggage as I examined the room for clues. I soon noticed that the casement window’s sashes were screwed so that they would not slide open.

“Monique, the window is locked.”

“Maybe someone committed suicide, and the hotel wants to prevent another fatal leap.”

“I don’t think that a leap from this window would be fatal, Agent 32. Come over and take a look.”

Monique walked over and saw that the flat roof of the second story was only 13 feet (4 meters) below. “If we had to evacuate quickly, we could jump onto that HVAC unit.” [It was only 8 feet (2.44 meters) below the sill.]

“Yes, we could, Agent 32, like in *Tiki Wiki*. [a previous short story] Never know when you’ll need an alternate exit.”

“Do you feel tired, Parkaar?”

“Surprisingly, not really, Monique. Want to tour the downtown on foot?”

“Sure! I want to take some pics and videos, 33.”

“Ok, let’s hit the streets of this town of Charles, Agent 32.”

At 3:47 PM we were walking down Leon Sullivan Way towards the Kanawha River. Monique stopped to take some pics of the patina-coated-spires of Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church.

Once across Kanawha Boulevard, we walked northwestward along a narrow riverside asphalt sidewalk. The sidewalk was level with the street curb, but just to the left, a very steep, grass-covered slope dropped down to a lower walkway some 25 feet (7.62 meters) or so below. If you weren’t paying attention – texting for example – you could take quite a nasty tumble. *Surprised there’s no railing. Very dangerous for bicycles and skateboards. Maybe they aren’t allowed on the upper walk. And, what about tipsy folks leaving pubs? Just one errant step. Has there not been a lawsuit yet? Not even any warning signs. I guess Charleston is not as litigious as Charlotte. Walker beware.*

“Watch your step, Monique. You could literally die if you landed the wrong way. No Facebooking [*sic*] here.”

“I hear you, Mr. Safety. But, unlike you, I can walk and chew gum. Don’t be so paranoid.” *Walk and chew gum? She must have got that phrase from my dad.*

“I’m paid to be paranoid, asawa.” [wife in Cebuano]

She just smiled.

A few minutes later we were passing under the mighty South Side Bridge, a Parker truss bridge. I looked back and noticed a stairway leading up to the road deck. *Ah, nice! The bridge allows for pedestrian crossings.*

“Want to walk across the bridge, Monique?”

“Maybe later, Parkaar. I think I’m feeling hungry again.”

“Ok, no problem, 32. Capitol Street is just ahead. Many good restaurants on that street from what I’ve read online.”

“Ok, lead the way, 33.”

We walked up to the historic, twelve-story Union Building, which was where Capitol Street came to a T-intersection with Kanawha Boulevard. The sidewalk was quite narrow. A sign just above the railing warned:

CAUTION

BOULEVARD
TRAFFIC
AT FOOT OF STEPS

And, they weren't kidding, either. Motor vehicles whizzed by us – inches from our toes – at 45 MPH (72.4 km/h). *You sure don't want to rush out of this building.*

After 30 to 40 seconds, we got a white crosswalk signal and traversed Kanawha Boulevard. We soon came upon a pair of late-20-something Caucasian male hipsters, who were chatting away outside Sam's Uptown Cafe and Bar. As we passed them, I heard one of them ask the other: "Are you staying in Charlie West this weekend?" *Staying in Charlie West? Huh?*

While waiting for the crosswalk signal to turn at Virginia Street, I turned to look at my lovely pinay (Tagalog for a Filipina) wife. "Hon, can I borrow your phone for a second?"

"Sure," she said as she handed the Samsung Galaxy to me. "Need to look at Google Maps?"

"Uh, no. I just need to look up a phrase."

"What phrase would that be, Parkaar?"

"Charlie West. Oh, I just found it. It's a nickname for Charleston, West Virginia. I heard one of those dudes back there say it." *He's always eavesdropping.*

I handed the phone back to Monique. We proceeded northeastward on Capitol Street. The sidewalks now had more people on them. Employees were getting off work. A desk clock in a storefront window stated that it was 4:31. *Ah, only off by a minute.*

We soon came upon The Elite Gentlemen's Club. Monique then looked at me. "Is this a totoy [boobs in Cebuano] bar, Parkaar?"

"I think so, mahal."

"So, they have these places in every city in America, 33?"

"Yeah, pretty much. But, they're not as wild as the ones in Manila."

"And, how would you know, my darling kano?" [Filipino slang for American] *Foot-in-mouth disease strikes again.*

"Oh, friends have told me." *What a lame answer. But, I'll give him a pass for now.*

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