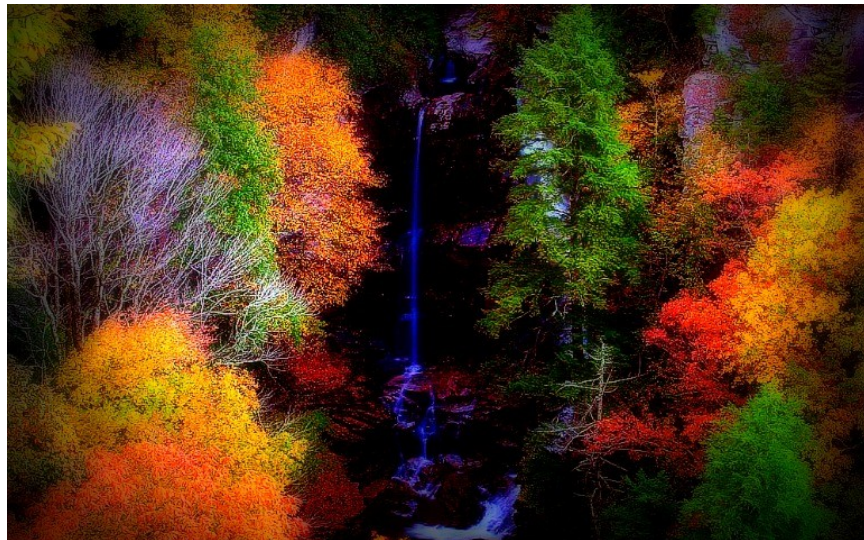


another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



**An Autumn Hike** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | AUG 2016

I met Areum, a short, sexy, jet-black-haired, 20-something Korean American lass, at a headshop in Charlotte (NC, USA) in the summer of 1994. After making small talk with her at the pipe counter for several weeks, I asked her out to a casual lunch at the sandwich shop across the street. She consented and we immediately struck up an engaging conversation. However, when she sensed that I was angling to ask her out on a date, she quickly informed me that she already had a boyfriend (a self-absorbed flake who I had run across). I was decidedly deflated. I thought: *Just my rotten luck*. But then, Areum offered up an enticing proposal.

“Mike, how would you like to ask my sister, Hye, out on a date? She’s two years older than me; taller, thinner, smarter, and prettier.” *So complimentary*.

“Why, sure,” I replied. “Would you happen to have a photo?”

“I sure do,” Areum answered. She then extracted a wallet-size photograph from her purse and showed it to me. *Yes, her sister is quite pretty. Plenty pretty for a bloke like me.*

“Both of you are cover girls,” I proclaimed.

“Stop that, Mike. You’ll make me blush.”

“Areum, how old is Hye?”

“She just turned 26. How old are you, Mike?”

“I just hit the big ‘three-oh-no’ a few weeks ago.”

“Perfect. Your ages are closer and you’re both Cancers.”

“Treatable and terminal?” *What did he say?*

“Gosh! What a morbid sense of humor you have – just like my boyfriend.” *Just like my boyfriend ... bleh!*

“So, do I just call her up?” *Does he really expect me to do it for him?*

“Sure! I’ll give you her phone number. She gets home from work at 5:45.”

Areum then handed me the corner of the just-written-on napkin and looked directly into my green eyes. “Mike, there are some things that I need to tell you about my sister.” *Ok, here comes the catch ...*

“Ok, go ahead, Areum. I’m all ears.” *What?*

“All ears? What does that mean?”

“Sorry. It’s just an American expression that means that the person is intently listening.”

“Oh, ok. There are so many idiomatic expressions in English.”

“Yeppers.”

“Well, I’m going to be frank about this, Mike. Hye was sexually abused by our dad. It went on for several years. When my mom found out, we headed to Charlotte to get away from him. He’s still in Albuquerque.” [NM, USA]

“Damn! That’s horrible.” *Poor girl.*

“She’s in therapy now. Hye has never had a boyfriend. Our father has sexually traumatized her. She’s afraid of sexual

intercourse now. If you date her, don't expect to be rolling around in the sheets. At least not for a long while." *She certainly is frank – boldly blunt.*

"I see. Thanks for telling me. I'll be hands-off. If anything physical happens, she will initiate it. And lead it. You have my word."

"Thank you so much, Mike."

"By the way, does Hye get high?" *Let's get Hye.*

"Absolutely not. Never has. Don't even ask her to."

"Ok, I won't."

"Thanks, Mike. I tried to get her to take a draw off a joint [marijuana cigarette] one day to relax her mind, but she was afraid that it would make her bad memories more painful."

"I see. Say, does Hye like mountain hiking?" *Hye-king.*

"She does. But, I wouldn't suggest that on a first date."

"Ok, I will hold off until date number six, Areum."

"Thanks, Mike. If I didn't have a boyfriend ..."

"Oh, just stop the torture, Areum."

She giggled. I paid the bill. Then we got up and marched back across the street to her marijuana paraphernalia emporium.

"You will call her, won't you?" Areum asked as she opened the front door to the headshop.

“I will,” I answered. “Promise.”

“Ok, I’ll tell her that a tall, kind-hearted, though strangely humorous, red-haired gentleman will be calling her tonight.”

“Thanks, Areum. Don’t toke too hard.” I quickly did a fake cough. “I mean work.”

She smiled, turned, and went inside the weed accoutrement store. Her tight black shorts were my last image of Areum on that hot and hazy day. Her ass was simply to die for. *What a hottie she is. Well, time to focus on Hye. She’s not chopped liver by any means. And you’re no Johnny Depp, pal.*

That evening at 6:06 PM, I called Hye from my rented two-bedroom house in the Chantilly neighborhood. She had a very soft voice that was timid yet direct. We agreed to have our first date at a Korean restaurant on Monroe Road (now out of business) on Saturday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>.

We met in the restaurant parking lot at 1:01 PM. She looked even better than advertised. *Wow! I’m way out of my league once again. Remember what Areum said. Go slow.*

“Hello, you must be Hye,” I said to the slender, attractive, 5’-6” Asian young lady standing next to a silver Nissan Sentra.

“Yes, that’s me,” Hye said with a reserved smile. “And, you must be Mike.”

“That is I.” *That is I? Is that correct English?*

“Nice to meet you, Mike.”

“Likewise, Hye. You look great!”

She extended her right hand. I shook it gently.

“Let’s continue our conversation inside, Mike. It’s hot and I’m hungry.” *I’m so ready for this infernal summer to end.*

“Lead the way, lovely lady.” *Lovely lady? I hope that he doesn’t make a play for sex. Didn’t Areum tell him?*

And with that we walked into the darkened restaurant. We were promptly seated as there was no line. There were only three diners and one older Korean American guy at the bar sipping a beer while watching a baseball game. *Go Giants!*

Hye explained the menu to me. I told her that I was mostly vegetarian now, but would consider scallops or clams. She suggested a spicy grilled seafood dish and I agreed to try it.

The cute Korean American waitress took our order and winked at me as she left. *What did that mean? Does she know Hye? Or, does it mean ‘nice date, dude’? Ah, the mysteries of this strange life.*

I reignited the conversation. “Have you been here before, Hye?”

“Yes, one other time, Mike. The food was only so-so. But, I told them how they could cook it better to make it tastier.” *She actually told them how to improve their cooking? Wow! I’m sure the chef loved that.*

“Really, Hye?” *Does he have a hearing problem?*

“Yes, I know true Korean food. I was born in Seoul and lived there until the age of 12. They Americanized it too much here. Too bland. Hopefully they took my advice.” *Woah!*

“I guess we shall see.”

“We will,” she said with an impassive expression.

The conversation didn't flow as easily as the one with Areum. Beneath Hye's stoic countenance, I could sense the emotional hurt and the psychological damage. It made me feel immensely sad for her. *How could a father do that to his daughter? So much despicable madness in this human race.*

The food finally came. I thought it was pretty tasty. Hye agreed.

“They must have implemented your suggestions, Hye.”

“I'm sure that they did.”

We finished our plates. I paid the bill and gave the waitress an 'I got this' look before leaving, even if I had my doubts.

I invited Hye over to my house to check out my artwork. She followed me in her car. My house on Kingsbury Drive was only two miles (3.22 km) away.

Once inside, Hye took a seat on the couch and drank some Korean beverage from the restaurant.

I walked around the living room, telling her about my neosurreal artwork on the beige walls. She seemed mildly interested. Then she perked up.

“How many do you sell per month, Mike?”

“One is a good month – a very good month,” I replied.

“You'll never make it at that rate, Mike.” *She's right.*

“Yeah, I know.”

“Well, what do you do for real income?”

“Technical writing on safety issues.”

“Mike, I’d expand that into a consultancy. I’ve never met a single artist that could live off their sales. It’s a rainbow-chasing longshot proposition. You’re 30 now. Time to get practical.” *That was brutally honest.*

“Yeah, you’re probably right, Hye. It’s a disease that’s hard to beat.”

“Art’s a disease! I like that, Mike.” Hye then laughed uncontrollably. It was a manic, alien laughter, which surprised the hell out of me. *So much for impressing her with my art or my artist ambition. Dead in the water on that score.*

Hye then got up to leave. We hugged lightly. I didn’t dare try to kiss her, and she certainly didn’t solicit such. However, we agreed to go on another date next weekend, which we did (a lame, instantly forgettable, romantic comedy movie).

Over the next month we had a total of five platonic lunches, dinners and picnics. Hye seemed to be trusting me more. This was confirmed when she called me from work on Thursday, October 13<sup>th</sup> and asked if we could go to the mountains on Saturday to do some hiking and leaf viewing. I immediately thought: *Ah, Areum must have suggested that to her. I owe her ... a pinch.*



At 9:19 AM Saturday, Hye was knocking on my front door. She was in running shorts and a tank top with brand-new white tennis shoes. The temperature was 54° (Fahrenheit; 12° Celsius).

“Are you not chilly, Hye?”

“Chilly? In Korea this is mild for a fall morning.”

“Well, come on in and have a cup of coffee while I round up my hiking stuff.” *He wasn't ready. Or, am I early?*

Seated at the antique dining table, Hye drank the coffee with a blank stare. She would occasionally gaze out the window above the air conditioner. Something was obviously playing on her mind.

Once I had finished loading my backpack, I looked at her. “Are you ok, Hye?”

“You're not going to rape and kill me up there, are you?” She delivered this line with utmost seriousness. *What the hell!*

“Me? Are you kidding? I'm afraid that *you* may be a man-killer. You don't have a weapon on you, do you?” I was just as serious.

My ploy worked. She smiled and even chuckled. Hye's body language became more relaxed.

“I was just testing you, Mike!” *I got him good.*

“I knew you were.” *Doubt that. / Just be patient with her.*

Soon we were in my Plymouth Voyager minivan, heading west on I-85 South. We were listening to some jazz-pop music (Swing Out Sister?). Hye was quiet until I took Exit 10 for US 74 West.

“How far away is that waterfall from here, Mike?”

“Big Bradley Falls is only seventy-five minutes from where we are now, Hye.”

“Oh, that’s not too far.”

“No, not at all, Hye. It is one of my favorite North Carolina waterfalls. It should be super-nice: The leaf colors are peak this weekend, I believe. Get your camera ready.”

“How long is the hike?”

“Under a mile. [1.61 km] But, we have to cross a stream. It’s not too strenuous overall. At least not to the overlook. To get to the base of the falls is another story, though. Very dangerous. There are ropes and ladders. Rappelling is required.”

“Oh.”

The conversation died. We crept through the traffic lights of Shelby.

“Need to stop anywhere for food or drink, Hye?”

“No, I’m all set with protein bars and energy drinks.”

“Ok, good deal.”

Soon we had cleared the western city limits of Shelby. We continued on US 74 towards Forest City in silence. After passing by Forest City, the highway became a fast-moving freeway. The majestic Blue Ridge Mountains loomed in the distance. Approaching autumnal splendor.

As I took the exit for I-26 West, Hye looked at the sign.

“So, it’s near Hendersonville,” she said while surveying the colorful mountains.

“Not that far, Hye. It’s just east of Saluda.” I turned and looked at her. *She trusts me. Feels good. Don’t do anything stupid to ruin it.*

Eight minutes later we were exiting onto Holbert Cove Road. There were a few houses interspersed in the densely forested area. Soon we came upon a pond next to the road.

“Want to take a swim?” I asked.

“Are you crazy?!” Hye shouted.

“Somewhat,” I replied.

She just shook her head and sighed.

We continued down the curvy mountain road. Then it went from asphalt to gravel. *Dear God, where is he taking me?*

A few minutes later, I turned off onto a dirt parking area, just before a small creek (Cove Creek). I turned the engine off.

“Well, we’re here,” I announced. “Ready for it?” *For ‘it’?*

“Sure. Let’s do it!” *How I wish we could. / Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.*

We stepped out of the van and got ourselves outfitted for the hike. There were two cars in the little lot. *I’m glad that there are other vehicles; other people being around will relax Hye. / This looks like a real trailhead. Mike wasn’t lying. He’s been trustworthy ... so far.*

And then we were off on our hike. The first part had us crossing an overgrown field that was once an apple orchard. Next, we entered the woods on a logging road that led to the creek. *I wonder if we can rock-hop this stream. The water level is down. I really don’t want to take my hiking boots and socks off.*

“What are these cables for, Mike?”

“Hye, at one time there was a sliding conveyance.” *A what?*

“Ok, let’s use it to get across.”

“I think I’m too tall to use it. But, go ahead. Just be careful. I’m going to cross it boulder-to-boulder style. I think my legs are long enough to span the gaps.”

“Ok, suit yourself, Mr. Artist.” *Mr. Artist?*

Both of our stream-crossing techniques worked: We both got across without getting wet.

Our hike wound through the fabulous fall-colored foliage on a wide dirt path. Then we heard the waterfall below, though we couldn’t see it.

“How far down is it, Mike?”

“Quite a ways, Hye. Let’s walk out to the overlook first.”

“Ok, lead the way, painter.” *Painter? She’s letting her guard down. I think she’s enjoying this hike with me.*

I then saw the blue blaze and crude arrow on an oak tree. We descended towards the overlook rock.

“Grab the roots for safety, Hye. Don’t worry; it’s not cheating.” *It’s not cheating? He’s an odd one.*

“Ok, thanks for the suggestion, Mike.”

We safely alighted on the granite outcrop that allowed for an expansive, awe-inspiring view of the gorge and the left side of the waterfall (right side blocked by a tall hemlock tree). It was red-orange-yellow overload. Postcard material.

“This is amazing!” Hye exclaimed.

“I know. What a splendid day to be alive.”

“Thanks for bringing me, Mike! I’m going to take some pictures now.”

“Yeah, sure. Go ahead. Just watch your step. There are no do-overs if you fall from here.” [It was 95 feet – 29 meters – straight down.]

“You won’t push me off now, will you?”

“No, I will wait ‘til later.” I chortled.

Hye frowned, but then a smile overtook her makeup-less face. "Mike, you are what we Koreans call a babo babo." [바보 바보]

"That didn't sound flattering. What does it mean?"

"Silly fool."

"I had to ask."

Hye had a hearty guffaw.

We ate, drank, and got lost in our thoughts on the overlook for probably an hour on a remarkably resplendent fall day in the Blue Ridge. Then the question.

"What do you want from life, Hye?"

"Good man and happy family." *Darn, she wants kids. [I saw myself being childless then.]*

"Children are a must?" *Is he sterile?*

"I couldn't imagine not having any. Not now, but someday." *Well, we're incompatible long-term, but we can enjoy each other's company for the near future.*

"I see." *Does he not like kids? But, he's from a large family. He's weird.*

Several Caucasian hikers approached.

"Ready to head back, Mr. Mike?" *Mr. Mike? She feels at ease around me.*

“Sure. Let’s not hog this rock. Lead the way, Miss Korea.”  
*He’s flirting with me.*

“I’m not a beauty pageant type. I’m not that pretty.”

“I beg to differ, Hye.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” *Hmmm.*

We marched back down the trail. I was a few paces behind Hye. I couldn’t help but stare at her sexy rump. *She doesn’t know how bad I want to have sex with her. / I know that he is checking out my ass and getting aroused. Typical male dog.*

When we got to a faded red blaze on the right, Hye started down a faint trail. Before I could say anything, she slipped, fell down, and started sliding on the fallen leaves towards a precipice. It was like a horrific scene unfolding in slow motion. She was headed, feet-first, for a cliff. It was at least a forty-foot (12.2 meters) drop. *Oh, my God! She’s going to die! It’s going to occur right here and now. This is a real-life tragedy happening right in front of my eyes! I’m going to have to tell her sister. Will she believe me? I’m going to have to go to the police. Will they believe it was an accident? Will anyone believe it was an accident? Ever? If she goes over that cliff, I’m next. I can’t deal with this.*

But then, with just a yard (meter) to spare, her left leg caught a pine sapling and her body came to rest on the edge of the ledge. She was stunned and lay motionless. *Thank God she didn’t go over! / Am I still alive?*

I hurried down the slope to Hye. I helped her up. She was shaken but generally ok. There were a few scrapes and bruises on her legs, but all things considered ...

“I’m so glad that you are alright, Hye. Your slide scared the crap out of me! I thought you were a goner.”

“Let’s not talk about it ever again, Mike. It was my mistake. I did wrong. I’m so sorry. You warned me. I’m very lucky.”

“Ok. But, don’t feel bad. I shattered my left ankle at Chimney Rock in 1989 on a risky descent.” [mentioned in the short story *Chimney Rocked*]

The ride back was mainly in silence. We kept replaying the near-fatal slide in our minds. *Tragedy narrowly averted.*

In Shelby we stopped at Chen’s on US 74 for some Chinese fare. We were faces-down at the table. Hye felt ashamed for having attempted that path to the base of the waterfall. Pervasive sorrow. It was if the worst had truly happened. Hye was now a ghost and I was the most doleful diner in the restaurant’s history.

We exited Chen’s in silence and got back on the road again. We were soon going by Crowders Mountain in the dying late afternoon sunlight. I looked up at the gray cliffs on the right and thought: *Fatal falls have also occurred up there. We got away with one today. Yessiree, we got real lucky.*

Hye and I would go out a few more times, but relationship momentum fizzled due to lifestyle differences. Also, Hye’s aspirations seemed incongruent with mine. I think that she sensed – most presciently – that I was an incorrigible



creative class clown (hyphenate as desired), and that I would wind up in my mom's basement one day. Additionally, given her awful teenage years, she needed a more regular kind of guy to aid her recovery – a much safer bet than me.

Areum soon quit the store. By chance I saw her in uptown Charlotte in 2006. She told me that Hye was now married with two kids. Hearing this made me smile. I told Areum that I was very happy for Hye.