

THE CAMPSITE vol. 2 – THE GRIND

When doing night shifts, the more there are in a row the better. This was my conclusion very soon after I started working as a campsite supervisor. At first I had assumed that there's no problem switching shifts, but two days, two evenings and two nights in a row made my internal clock miss beats.

Therefore I was only too happy to see a five night stretch on the schedule in late June. It's the lightest part of the year, and even in the middle of the night there's ample light to see what's cooking at the site. Besides, at that time of the year, action is on twenty-four-seven. There are people who want to rent a canoe at 3am, or play minigolf, or light a fire so they can warm up the sausages they forgot in the back of the car when they found the cases of beer cans after pitching the tent. Our task was to block the proposals that would cause noise or trouble, and facilitate those that were within reason.

On this night, a week after Midsummer, my colleague and by now good friend Jore was my partner for the night shift. He'd been clever and arrived fifteen minutes early for the shift, so as to visit the cafeteria and offer to relieve the café girls of the unsold Danish pastries and sweet rolls. He had a large stash of these in the fridge when I got there.

We gathered the latest intelligence from the leaving day shift; apparently the site was somewhat full but calm, except for a set of rowdy youths and their girlfriends, who had two large tents set up at the far corner of the site. "Any chance of using gas? Or the truncheon at least?" Jore asked, hopeful as ever. The day guys assured us the gang was not likely to turn violent at all, but noise levels would need monitoring probably all through the night. Jore looked like a mortician whose latest job unexpectedly walked away from the table.

I didn't mind. For me, the enjoyment of the job did not derive from the adrenaline highs of crises. My favorite part of the job was making the site run smooth, so that people would leave comments of praise in the guest book, and let word of mouth bring us more guests. Sure, I liked the excitement of getting a report from the beach that someone is drunk and acts threatening, and we'd go and see if we can handle it or whether we should call the cops, but that was all secondary to just ensuring things were right all over the site.

It was a calm night, all right. We did the half-hour check trips to the highest point of the site, from where we could scan the whole site and identify trouble spots. At eleven, we did the full rounds and closed the gates and lowered the boom across the only way in or out, and from then on, on the hour, we walked the beat around the perimeter. It's funny how every rock along the path forms into a memory, one that doesn't dissipate even in twenty years – I can still picture the route, rock by rock.

By 02.30 we were back in the dull glare of the neon lights in the reception. "Feel like a Danish pastry?" Jore asked, and opened the fridge. Two pastries is great, three is still okay, but

having five at that ungodly hour is an idea that shouldn't occur to anyone. By the time of the next beat we were feeling nauseous.

"Check the job list before we go, willya?" Jore shouted from the loo. The job list was the head supervisor's faint attempt at boosting productivity at the site. All shifts were supposed to look at the list every time they went out of the door, and if they had time in their hands, to fix things and then make a report. The list was posted on the door of the reception so as to be unmissable, but the night shift always moved it onto the other side of the door. Don't get mad, get even, and so on.

I checked the list. "NIGHT SHIFT – check all cabin stairs and foundations and report those in need of maintenance. LIST FINDINGS ON SHEET IN SUPERVISOR LOG", it said in caps for us peons to understand. I then went to find the list of cabins at the back of the book, and found it empty even if dated three weeks back. Someone has to be the first, I thought, and pocketed a notebook and pen.

We could hear the far corner party people still going strong, so we went around the site in reverse to get there sooner. As predicted by the day shift, these people were merely having a ball, but they had some drunken compassion for their fellow campers and agreed to shut up. We remained there until they all were in their tents, and then continued along the path towards the cabins. Jore reported for me. "Cabin 24 – stairs OK – foundations OK. Cabin 23 – stairs OK – foundations OK. Cabin 22 – stairs need repair (3 steps) – foundations OK." We proceeded down the road and checked not just cabins but the overall situation at the site.

Most of the cabins were fine, but Cabin 18 was a problematic one. It stood at the foot of a little hill and rainwater flowed down right by the cabin. The stairs were almost okay, but the foundations were in a bad way. Jore took out a screwdriver from his back pocket and pushed it in the wooden foundation without effort.

"A screwdriver? You're a pro."

"Hey, if we got to do this, might as well do it right. Anyway, write this down: Cabin 18 – stairs OK – foundations bad. When poked with a screwdriver, it enters the wood as if pushed into a decaying rooster."

"That's a mighty powerful way of putting it, Jore."

Jore beamed. "My Finnish teacher told me in high school I have a way with metaphors and similes."

I had to agree, and I wrote it down verbatim.

At 3:30 we had checked half the cabins but the yearning for salt was getting unbearable. "What if we popped in the café and liberated some sausages, and set up a little fire behind the reception? We can always leave some money on the till," Jore said. "I don't think they'd mind, especially if we left a note and wrote it was Harri who did it." Harri was our resident hunt master who specialized in blondes, and had an unusually suave way of explaining things.

“I don’t know the new keycode. They changed it after half the sausages went missing in action one night, remember? Markku and his pals had the sauna party?”

Jore winced. “Oh yeah... I was on duty that night. We shouldn’t let supervisors hire the sauna. Conflicting interests.”

We walked uphill in silence, trying to figure what to eat. The cashier girls owned most of the reception fridge contents, and the thought of a tired tuna salad, combined with the wrath of the owner, didn’t appeal to us. The supervisors’ food in the fridge was usually capable of walking out of the open door on its own.

“I know. There’s the box of oatmeal Jukka has on the top shelf in the kitchen. Let’s make some and add lots of salt”, Jore said. This was a thought worth supporting. Oatmeal is one of the most underrated foods in the world, though it is a staple in Finland. Just the thought of a hot plate of it with an eye of butter and sugar on top made the saliva flow. We gave a casual glance to the remaining checkpoints along the fence and hurried back.

Another good feature of oatmeal is that it is fast to prepare. Within fifteen minutes we had a steaming plate full of richly-salted porridge in front of us, and we even found a carton of butter that looked fresh enough. All we now needed was sugar.

Jore went through every cupboard and drawer like a ferret, but all he could find was a box of sugarcubes. “I don’t believe it! It’s only a week since I stole a kilo of fine sugar from the café and now it’s all used up. Some people like their sugar rush with coffee. Now what? Grannies suck coffee through sugar cubes, that’s the only use for them.”

I thought for a moment, then went out front and produced a ziploc bag from reception desk. We had a fresh supply of these for the purpose of slipping the receipt into them when it was raining, so they wouldn’t dissolve when hung from a tent cord. “You, Sir, are a genius!” Jore exclaimed and fetched a hammer. Soon we had sugar on the oatmeal, and our nutrition levels returned to normal. I volunteered to do the dishes and had things clean after a while.

But the question always remained, now what? Night shifts, especially easy ones, are boring by default. Jore started balancing the hammer on his forehead, but one hit on the head was enough to wean him from that. Then he gave the the sugar bag a few ponderous bangs with the hammer. The sugar was already quite finely ground.

Whoever said that idle hands are the tools of the devil was probably a close personal friend of Jore’s. He attacked the bag with renewed vigor. As soon as he had bashed the remaining sugar into a powder, he went to collect the supervisor log book. With a dedicated look on his face, he wrote, “A calm night. The rowdy party at the lakeside was silenced at 2.30. Cabins checked as per job list from 13 to 24, see report for details. Nothing more worth mentioning.”

“We usually write that at 6.45, remember?” I said.

“Watch me.”

Jore taped the little ziploc bag on the page below his entry, then wrote, "One more thing: this was pinned to the underside of the stairs at Cabin 18."

"Why do I smell trouble, Jore?" I said.

"Naaah. I just want to give the head supervisor a little jolt." He closed the book with a bang. "How about a round of minigolf? The sun is up already."

"Sure," I said, and by the time we'd played six holes, I had already forgotten all about the book. When we finished the game, the early birds were already at the gate, wishing to leave for Nordkapp, or Vaasa, or Kuopio, or whatever. The morning shift arrived at 6.45 and we left for a good day's sleep.

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Arriving back at the site at 10.45 pm I was surprised to see the head supervisor's car still at the reception. Jukka usually put in office hours with an occasional night shift thrown in to show moral support to the troops. He was about to leave when I met him at the door. If there ever was a glacial smile, the one he gave me was it.

"Hello Heikki. How was last night with Jore?"

Before I could answer, he went on. "You know I am not above a healthy prank or two myself, but I'd like to see the line drawn at the point beyond which the police gets involved. Good night." He stormed past me and drove off like a pike after a passing perch.

I went in to see the day shift all in giggles. When they saw the tail lights of Jukka's car disappear down the road, they erupted in laughter. "Hey - it's the rotten rooster team! Way to go guys! You may want to check the roster for the new arrangement for the month. You win this year's prank award." Jore was sitting in the corner, looking not entirely happy.

I was mystified and demanded an explanation from the day crew, Petri and Harri. Petri gave me a double thumbs-up and let Harri to recount what had happened during the day. "I heard this from the morning guys, I wasn't here then yet. Apparently Jukka got here around nine, and as always, went straight for the supervisor log. When he opened it and saw that bag of white dust, he ripped it off the page and ran for the telephone, called the cops and held the bag at an arm's length while waiting for the police." Harri had to dry off tears.

"Then the cops got here, in maybe five minutes, tooting their horns and flashing their lights. They ran up to the reception, but as soon as they saw the dust bag, hey said, 'Oh no, not us. Call the Central Criminal Police guys, they handle all narcotics.' And they fled the scene. So Jukka called again and asked for someone that deals with these crimes. About two hours later a solitary unmarked Lada appeared and some plainclothes man came to the window. He picked up the bag with gloves and put it in a bigger bag without a word. Then he gave Jukka a paper to sign and left."

"An hour later the phone finally rang. The caller was pretty short in his words - he said they had their own supply for sugar." At this Harri nearly fell off the chair, he was laughing so

hard. “And when Jukka heard this, he just went to the schedule and ripped it off the wall and wrote up a new one.”

I went to see the new schedule. After a cursory glance I put on my best expression of utter disdain. “Oh damn. Another eight nights. And in a row!”