BOY SCOUT JAMBOREE

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IN SPRING THE SCOUTS USED TO HOLD A JAMBOREE over at the old Three County Fair Grounds across the river. Naturally, this involved staying overnight in tents, a significant part of the scouting experience. The idea was to introduce new tenderfoots to the scouting brotherhood beyond their local troop and to initiate them into the special realm of scouting lore.

Usually, several tenderfoots would share a tent with one of the senior scouts, someone in his mid to late teens. This was the arrangement that spring when I had just become a tenderfoot myself and was striking out for greater scouting glory. At night when we had finished whacking our tent into shape after a couple of false starts, we tenderfoots piled in and began fussing around with our sleeping bags. No sooner had I finished sliding into my bag when someone on the outside barked that we had to evacuate the tent and do it now.

"But I just took my shoes and socks off."

"I don't give a shit if you're stark naked—just grab your stuff and get the hell outta there!"

"But, crimers, where're we supposed to go?"

"Just go over to one of the other tents—they'll be waitin' for you."

"But what's this all about, anyway? What's going on?"

"We'll tell you all about it later. Just get a move on!"

When we finally clambered out of the tent, I flinched at the cold, damp night air. We were, after all, just a few hundred yards from the river in what would have been the river-bed itself just a couple of ages ago. Wearing only a shirt, I started to go back in the tent for my jacket, but George, our senior scout, yelped at me, "Where the hell do you think you're goin'. I told you to get out of the tent!"

"I know, I know. I was just going back for my jacket. It's cold out here."

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"Hurry up, then, damn it," George said with real irritation.

When I came back out, the other boys were shivering and shuffling around the tent. George was on the other side of the tent about fifteen or twenty yards away huddling with a small group of people, including a few of the other senior scouts and, to my amazement, what looked like a couple of girls. It was hard to see in the dark, but it didn't seem to me that these girls—if that's who they were—were trying to pretend they were anything but girls, much less boy scouts. We couldn't make out any of the words, but the conversation seemed animated.

Another twenty yards in the direction of the river was a bigger tent with a light on inside, so we trundled over to it. As it turned out, no one was waiting for us, but we were let in anyway and took our places in front of a cot that one of the leaders was sitting on. Here was a man from a neighboring troop whose name was Bob. As soon as we got seated, Bob gave us a curt but warm welcome and resumed regaling the boys with all kinds of jokes and stories, in which scouting played only the most metaphorical of roles. After about half an hour, Bob ran out of material, we were all yawning, and it was time to go to bed. When Bob said it was time for us to return to our own tent, one of us pointed out to him that George had not said when we could come back. "You just go back and tell George that Bob says it's time for all good scouts to be in bed so that we can get a good early start with reveille in the morning," was his reply.

When we got back to our own tent, however, George was nowhere to be found. George's constant companion, Jim, another senior scout with his own tent, told us that George had gone off to the horse barns to clean up and that we ought to do the same. We were too tired for this, though, and so we opted for having a pee off to the side on the sandy racetrack. As much as we wanted to wait for George to get back so that we could grill him about our sudden eviction from the tent and the other events of the evening, none of us lasted that long, and we only got to see George again the next morning when, as promised, a genuine scout bugle sounded reveille.

George was not exactly taking command on this morning, as he spent an inordinate amount of time fiddling around with his sleeping bag and his clothing. He hollered over to Jim, "Hey, Jim, one of my socks is, er—out of commission. What am I goin' to do? I can't just go around in one sock. What'll Bob and them say? Definitely not good scouting practice."

Jim thought a minute and replied, "I guess you'd better just go without any socks at all, since wearing one will look pretty silly."

"I don't know about that. They'll say this ain't no beach party, it's a Boy Scout Jamboree and everyone is supposed to be dressed like real Scouts."

"OK then, we'll just have to find you another pair. I'll go over to Bob's and see what I can round up."

As George and Jim tried to sort out the business with the socks, we stood around listening and wondering how George, who was supposed to be setting us a good scouting example, could be so sloppy as to lose one of his socks. Finally, Billy, the wise guy in our group, blurted out, "So, George, are we to understand one of your socks is—what'd you call it—'out of commission'? Is that right, did we get that right?"

"That's right, Billy, one of my socks is out of commission."

"I'd never heard of that before that a sock was out of commission. I take it that means you can't wear it for some reason."

"That's right, Billy boy. I can't wear it."

"So, what exactly is wrong with it so that it's out of commission and you can't wear it? Why don't you give it here and we'll see if maybe we can't fix it. Or, better yet, we'll go find those girls and see if one of them can't fix it. They probably know all about socks—especially your socks."

At this George exploded, "All right, god damn it, you get your little scout asses over to the horse barns and wash up. We've gotta have breakfast and get on over to the stands for the ceremonies."

As we began slinking off to the horse barns, Billy got off one last salvo, "Come on, George, I still think you should give me that sock of yours. Then I can find your girl-friend, 'cause she'll be able to tell us what's wrong with it and fix it." At that George raised his fist as if to punch Billy, who was at least twenty yards away now and trying to suppress a smirk. Then George turned suddenly away, and I thought I saw him trying not to smile himself.

At the horse barns we had a good splash of bracing cold water and a pee. Breakfast consisted of whatever we had brought with us, which in my case was a couple of homemade muffins and a swig or two of water from my grandfather's World War I canteen. Although I romanticized that the moldy smell it gave off was really that of gunpowder, I could barely get the rancid water past my lips.

After breakfast we were summoned once again by the Boy Scout bugle to a meeting of the whole jamboree over in the wooden stands that looked

balefully out on the racetrack's infield, where no baseball would ever be played. About eighteen years later, on a hot late summer day I would come back to these very stands on the occasion of the Three County Fair, the ostensible reason for this facility's existence. On that occasion, after wending our way through the little kiosks and stalls near the entry to the grounds, where all manner of bric-a-brac and ticky-tack were sold, my wife and I made a dash for the track. When we got there, we were just in time to place a bet on a horse whose name was Drink Up. Unlike some of my friends, I have never had the patience to work my way through the racing forms; I prefer to make strictly hunch bets. The beauty of these hunch bets is that you really can't lose on them—of course you can lose your money, but you can't lose the bet, because a good hunch bet, win or lose, will stay with you forever. And so it was with Drink Up, who after making a valiant foray into the leaders part of the way down the stretch, suddenly fell back, just as though one of the boys from the cattle show had mistaken him for a calf and put a rope on him, so that he wound up next to last in a field of nine or ten.

On that earlier cold spring morning, however, all the troops from Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire counties, all dressed, more or less, in real Boy Scout regalia had assembled, not to bet on nags, who could lift your spirits and let them down with equal speed, but to hear an inspirational talk about the joys and obligations of scouting, delivered through a scratchy battery-powered old bull horn. This homily through a horn by someone big from the regional scout council started out boldly with the words, "Boys, I've come up here this morning to tell you what Scouting is all about. I'm here to tell you why it is we have assembled here, all of us from the three surrounding counties, to celebrate the true meaning of Scouting."

At this point he stopped and turned away slightly from his bull horn to clear his throat, but he didn't turn away far enough and inadvertently gave out a loud barking, hacking sound. He recovered quickly, though, and went on to say, "Boys, it is better to be together as scouts than apart not as scouts." The talk then began to meander about like the spring freshets in the river's nearby oxbow, until finally it came to rest on the inevitable injunction that we should all be—what else—prepared. All the while the scouts fidgeted in their seats, shuffling their feet, rubbing their hands together, and chattering their teeth in an effort to get warm. The climactic affirmation of the famous motto was greeted by a combination of applause and mild tittering. The ap-

plause was of course for the end of speech, whereas the tittering came from the fact that this admonition had long ago acquired in the minds of the listeners an altogether different meaning than the one Sir Baden Powell had intended. To wit, the scouts' well-intentioned exhortation was now universally understood by teenagers to mean that it was always a good idea to take along a "rubber."

I now need to make a disclaimer: the men who ran the scouts then were good men; they were men of good will and good intentions who spent lots of time they could have spent on the golf course or in bars trying to mold the youth of America. My own beloved grandfather was a life-long scout who took me to a summer camp for scouts in New Jersey (Camp Ken-etiwa-pec) and was awarded one of Scouting's highest honors (the Silver Beaver)—not for that, of course. Nor am I so self-absorbed or psychologically incompetent that I would blame my scout leaders for my inability to tie knots or put up and take down tents, or for the under-done carrots and potatoes in my camp-fire stew. These failings were wholly a result of my own personal weaknesses, principal among which was my obsession with sports that the scouts did not play. If our scout leaders were not always able to shape us in the fashion they had strived for, this was not so much their fault as a result of the fact that society had taken several turns Sir Baden Powell had not foreseen. It was also a result of the hormonal explosion that we were undergoing at the time.

After the talk and a few flourishes of the flags on the infield in front of the stands were complete, the scouts went back to their respective local troops to continue the day's program. As we shuffled along the sandy track, Billy sidled up to George, who had kept mostly out of sight during the ceremonies, and remarked, "So, George, I heard there was a whole lot of hummin' 'n strummin' goin' on last night."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"You know what we're talkin' about," said Billy, now more emboldened than ever.

"I don't know, Billy, you and your buddies need to get back to your business. There's lots of stuff to do today and you're talkin' about some sort of musical performance or somethin'. There was no music at the Fair Grounds last night."

But Billy wouldn't let go and he said, "OK, George, it's goin' to come out sooner or later, so you might as well give us the whole story, hummin' 'n

strummin' and all. I mean we know all about them girls and everythin', so just tell us the rest of the story."

"If you know all about them girls," said George, now mocking Billy, "then what's to tell. Just a couple of girls who came around to see what's goin' on at the Fair Grounds."

"Yeah, but this is supposed to be a BOY Scouts Jamboree, not a Boys and Girls Scout Jamboree, or am I missin' somethin'?"

"No, you're not missin' very much. I can see that."

"Right then, so let's have the rest of the scoop, George. Let's have the whole story, that's all we want," said Billy, and a couple of the others chimed in with their own "yeah, George, let's have the whole story."

George then put on a very serious face, bent down to the level of us junior scouts, who were now desperate to hear him speak, and said, "All right then, you all come round and I'll tell you what." When about six of us had surrounded him, he gave us a look to draw us into his confidence and in a whisper said, "This is the way it was . . . we saw these girls and then . . ."

Now George had us where he wanted us, as we were practically wetting ourselves with anticipation. Suddenly he stopped whispering and bellowed out right in our faces, "OK, you tenderfoots, God damn it, get the hell back to your posts and get back to work!!"

We didn't really have any posts but we got the message and backed away from George as fast as we could. The success of George's stratagem was short lived, however, and bits and pieces of the story began to circulate among the scouts from various more or less reliable sources. As the day wore on, filled as it was with lessons in both the practical arts and the lore of scouting, the story of the hummin' 'n strummin' twins began to take shape. It turned out that the two girls I had seen really were girls. Not only that, they had come to the Fair Grounds with the express purpose of taking advantage of the very fact that they were girls. They were not actually twins but sisters close in age, two slightly teased blondes dressed in brown leather jackets, white mohair sweaters, black slacks, and white sneakers and bobby socks. No one had to say directly what it is they accomplished on their little visit, since their rhyming nickname seemed to tell the whole story. But did it really? Adolescent boys are dying to hear all the details, and when they don't get them, they just make them up. The lack of them in this instance just served to drive our pubescent fantasies wild. The boys from our tent were particularly wound up, since the alleged activities of the evening before had taken place

right where we had slept. All chores and routines were automatically accompanied by ritual tuneless humming sounds and, where possible, exaggerated strumming motions, as though the whole crowd of us had suddenly become some sort of jug band.

By late in the day, when the time came to dismantle our little tent village, we tenderfoots were utterly exhausted. On the drive home back to our small town across the river some of us tried at first to keep up the patter about the hummin' 'n strummin' twins, but soon we grew silent and dozed on and off the rest of the way.

The next day, Monday, we were all back in school. Usually, after a scouting outing such as the one we had been on, we all went back to the junior high and senior high schools and instantly forgot about what had gone on over the weekend. To be honest, scouting was not thought of as particularly "cool" in certain circles, particularly the early rocker set, so we rarely brought up the subject to our buddies. But this time was different, as the story of the hummin' 'n strummin' twins at the Jamboree quickly began to assume colossal proportions. The initial version that the girls had spent their time with only Jim and George grew into several legends. The most popular one going around the high school was that they had managed to visit all of the scouts of Hampshire County. In the junior high, where everything tended to be more extravagant, the most outrageous version was that they set out to conquer Franklin and Hampden as well, but only daybreak had stopped them. There was even talk of a fifty cent fee, but we were sure that was nonsense. On the scouting front, there are no records to back me up, but I am absolutely sure that there was a rise in attendance at scouting functions for the next several months.

George and Jim, who strutted about like peacocks for several days on their return to the regional high school, received their share of attention, but it was the girls, seen by only a handful of scouts, who turned out to be the true heroes, or so I thought. This was fitting because, after all, what had the two senior scouts really done? The girls, on the other hand, had shown remarkable initiative, not to mention chutzpah, by entering the ostensibly all-male jamboree unhindered and leaving it un-apprehended by any of the scout leaders (who were too busy telling tall stories). We young tenderfoots were simply dying to find out exactly how these two girls performed their magic, which, to our chagrin, was still in the realm of deep mystery. The best we could do, however, was to discover that they were exceptionally neat and

tidy, almost clinical in their conduct. On entering the tent we had just left, they took off only their sneakers. Of course, they unbuttoned their jackets, but we were unable to determine whether this meant that they allowed Jim and George to cop a feel.

Later, I began to wonder what the two girls had talked about on the way back home in their Ford or Chevrolet and I realized that this is how the conversation went:

Sweater Sister: "You know, that George—that's his name isn't it? That George is a pretty good looking guy, don't you think?"

Slacks Sister: "Sure, he's pretty good looking but I think if we got to know him a little he'd turn out to be a real jerk."

Sweater: "Why d'ya say that?"

Slacks: "I don't know—he just seems to think he's so smart. All he could talk about was all the schemes he's got for making money."

Sweater: "Yeah, a real mister big stuff in the making."

Slacks: "So, what'ed you think about his buddy Jim there?"

Sweater: "Not too much, really. He was so nervous all the time and all he could do was follow George around and try to do what George was doing."

Slacks: "That's about it."

I also realized that these girls had been brought up by a strict mother who had told them not to go to the Fair Grounds, because "you just never know what those Boy Scouts might be up to." This helps to explain why they were so neat and tidy—they didn't want mom to have any suspicions about where they had been or what they had been doing. Growing up in a little hill town on their side of the river, a virtual twin of the little hill town we lived in on our side, they were by definition dying of boredom. How better to relieve that boredom than by sneaking into the BOY SCOUT JAMBOREE at the Fair Grounds, where they knew all the nooks and crannies, as did all the local folk.

For all of my not entirely prurient fascination with these two young women, I never made an attempt to find out anything more about them, much less actually find them. Where would I have started? Would I have called George or Jim, who I haven't seen since high school, and asked . . . asked what? There's no way to start a conversation like that. I wondered whether I might have crossed paths with the girls; after all, the valley is not that large and everyone is connected to everyone else through someone or

by something. No, for all the time I spent on their side of the river, I always thought it was most unlikely that I had ever seen them.

Then one day I remembered The Three County Fair and Drink Up and I realized that they were there—not in my imagination, but in actuality. They were there, because everyone from all the towns around goes to The Fair, which takes place on Labor Day Weekend. They go for a whole lot of reasons—because everyone else does, because there is something there for every taste and lack of taste, because it's a rare chance to make a legal bet. They were there together, because they always went everywhere together and they were obviously gamblers by nature. I'm not saying they bet on the same horse I did, although there is a chance they did that too. But they were there in the stands, not with their teenage children, who were off looking for trouble elsewhere on the Fair Grounds, but with their husbands, Rough Robbie and Terrible Tom, who they had married in hopes of reforming them. They were definitely there that year, as they had been in years past and will be in years to come. And so now, after finally finding them in the only way I know how, I raise my glass to them.