



Laurie McClellan

[Main](#) [Contents](#)



Laurie McClellan is a freelance writer and editor. A recent graduate of the Johns Hopkins University writing program, her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Frederick Magazine*, and other publications. In a previous life as a television producer, Laurie wrote scripts for both the National Geographic Channel and the Discovery Science Channel, and was nominated for an Emmy for her work covering the crisis in Darfur. Laurie lives in Arlington, Virginia with her husband and two badly behaved cats. She still loves s'mores, but recommends making them with dark chocolate instead of Hershey bars.

The Thin Mint Mutiny

Orientation week at Camp Singing Hills started on a sunny day in early June. All 20 of us counselors sat in a circle on the floor, singing and clapping along to "I Put My Head in a Little Skunk's Hole."

*I put my head in a little skunk's hole
And the little skunk said, well, bless my soul
Take it out, take it out, take it out, take it out
Remove it!*

I breathed in the scent of old wood smoke wafting up from the orange indoor-outdoor carpeting and eyed the lodge nervously. Dusty pinecones and birds' nests decorated the stone fireplace. Homemade felt banners shouted out the Girl Scout mottos, "Make New Friends, But Keep the Old" and "My Honor Is To Try." The other girls seemed to have taken both exhortations to heart, radiating both sincerity and perkiness as their shiny hair bounced in time to the music. I was in a strange place, and I didn't know a soul. I started to wonder if taking this job sight unseen had really been such a good idea.

When the last counselor joined our circle, Roberta, the camp director, stood up and smiled benevolently from under the brim of a floppy khaki hat. Roberta hailed from somewhere in the comfortably padded part of middle age. Her brown hair was cut straight across, right below her ears, and her broad face was so clean it shone. Somehow, she reminded me of a nun.

"For our first exercise, I want you all to make yourself a name tag," Roberta said. "But don't use your real name – put down something funny!" Without thinking, I grabbed a slip of construction paper and scribbled the latest annoying nickname invented by my brother.

"Surprise!" said Roberta, pinning on her own tag, which read "Tumbl'weed." "These will be your camp names for the rest of the summer!" I stared at the tag in my hand, incredulous. I was going to spend the next eight weeks being called "Toad."

I'd landed at Camp Singing Hills mostly by accident. I'd just finished my freshman year of college. I'd tasted the freedom of living in a dorm and drinking rum punch out of trash cans, and I didn't want to go back to my hometown and work in the mall. So I applied to spend the summer as a camp counselor in eastern Indiana, in exchange for \$640, plus room and board. I'd read about indentured servitude in my Colonial History class, yet when I was offered the same deal in 1982, I didn't even blink – I just said yes.

But after getting my new name, orientation week was actually fun. Tumbl'weed led us on a tour of the camp, which looked promising. Its centerpiece was a treeless, steep green hill, perfect for rolling down, where the dining hall stood. Daisies and Queen Anne's lace poked up through its mowed grass. A lake with a miniature island filled the hollow below, and dirt roads led off into the oak and pine woods beyond.

I met my tent mates, Muffy and Hooter. Muffy wore a fresh white Izod shirt every day. She'd taken her counselor name from *The Preppy Handbook*, a volume she often consulted for guidance. Hooter was tall and gangly with loose blond hair. All summer long, she smoked joints that friends sent her in the mail.

The three of us moved into a canvas platform tent just large enough to shelter four cots under its sloping sides. Both ends stood open to the air. We slept under mosquito netting hung over our sleeping bags and thin, blue-striped mattresses. The tent held a magnetic attraction for spiders, and during that first week we invented a bedtime ritual: the Spider Race. We'd all shine our flashlights on the canvas ceiling, someone would shout go, and then we were off, plucking spiders from the ceiling and flinging them out the open door. When the last spider sailed outside, whoever had caught the most won. But even the losers scored in the double digits. Then we lay in the humid dark and discussed the day, our sleepy voices fading into a chorus of crickets and bullfrogs.

Together, we made some discoveries. The muddy camp lake didn't have a name, but did possess plenty of snapping turtles. The crafts cabin was stocked mostly with rocks and sticks. We learned to paint rainbows and smiley faces on the rocks (an activity called "making paperweights" on the camp schedule) and wind yarn around the sticks (called "crafting a God's Eye"). We practiced building campfires, and I developed the scent that would

stay with me all summer — a potent mix of Extra-Strength Off, wood smoke, dirt, and cherry Kool-Aid.

On Sunday, a line of cars crawled up the gravel road, through the tunnel of pine trees, and into the parking lot. The first set of fourth graders had arrived. All the girls had earned part of their camp fee by selling Girl Scout cookies, and they could never forget that fact once they arrived. We ate Girl Scout cookies for dessert after lunch, for dessert after dinner, and ended each day with an evening snack of Kool-Aid and Girl Scout cookies. The strange thing was, we never got the good varieties. Most of the counselors had been Girl Scouts themselves. If there was one thing we knew, it was the hierarchy of Girl Scout cookies, as strict as the order of ascension for the British throne, and just as unforgiving.

At the absolute pinnacle towered the Thin Mint: a mint wafer topped with mint chocolate. Not only the perennial top-selling cookie, but also my favorite. The number two cookie changed with the year — sometimes the peanut butter, sometimes the sandwich creams. At the bottom of this pecking order squatted the lowly Scot Tea. A bland piece of shortbread dusted with sugar crystals, Scot Teas only sold well to grandmothers and those plagued with digestive problems. But not only did plates of Scot Teas appear at two out of every three camp meals, we never once tasted a Thin Mint. The reason was clear, even to the least cynical Scout among us. We were eating leftovers.

This suspicion hardened into fact once we considered the second-most common item in the mess hall: cheese. The kitchen held row after row of ten-pound cheddar bricks labeled "Surplus Extruded Government Cheese." Apparently a vast federal facility existed somewhere in America where they ruined cheese by pressing it through an extruder, so it formed waxy ropes that looked like spaghetti. Extruded Government Cheese was so unappetizing in its raw form that our cook only served it melted. It topped eggs at breakfast, blanketed hamburgers at lunch, and completely engulfed potatoes and macaroni at dinner.

Despite all this bounty at the cook's fingertips, she drove into town twice a week to shop for groceries. After just a week of camp, I longed for this trip the way other people yearn to visit Paris. Volunteer grocery shoppers escaped the campers for two hours, cooled off in an air-conditioned, mosquito-free building, and got to talk with other adults. On the down side, we had to ride in the camp's van — the Happy Mobile.

The Happy Mobile started life as an ordinary, kelly green van. Then sometime in the late 1970s, campers painted "The Happy Mobile!!!" on each of its sides in wavy, three-foot high letters. In 1982, times were bad in the industrial Midwest. As we drove through town in the Happy Mobile, we met laid-off factory workers, the discontented, and the unemployed at every intersection. The sight of our van tended to focus their rage. At every red light, drivers raised their middle fingers. The cook usually hit the accelerator hard the second the signal turned green, but as we sped away, our windows open to the Indiana heat, the sound of "Fuck you, Happy Mobile!" often trailed behind us like a fading siren.

During the second week of camp, Tumb'l'weed began vanishing after the morning announcements, never to be seen again. She didn't show up at lunch, dinner, or evening assemblies. She didn't give us any help with programs. In fact, she didn't appear to be directing the camp at all. The weeks of June ticked by, and we counselors muttered complaints to each other, but soldiered on.

The Fourth of July fell on a Sunday. We sat in the cafeteria that morning, limply fanning ourselves and planning the coming week. The new campers weren't due to arrive until lunchtime. Tumb'l'weed was absent as usual, and Moosey, the assistant director, was running the meeting. Nearly six feet tall, Moosey still wore her brown hair in the feathered style of five years ago. She was perpetually optimistic. But that day, she turned down our request for sparklers as "too dangerous."

"We can go on a night hike instead!" she said, clapping her hands together with excitement. "I know this great hill, where we can see the fireworks from town. The girls will love it!"

An hour before sunset, we herded the girls into one long line and started up an overgrown path. Mosquitoes rose in clouds from wild rose bushes growing along the trail. We pushed our way through, more scratched and bloody with each step. When the kids opened their palms to slap mosquitoes, they dropped their flashlights. The delicate tinkle of bulbs shattering punctuated our steps. As dusk fell, every other girl stumbled along in her own pool of darkness, arms held in front to ward off obstacles like a zombie.

"Come on, girls!" Moosey called cheerily. "We're going to have a great view from up here!"

We made it to the top at 9:00, fireworks time, full dark. Nothing. At 9:20, amid a chorus of scratching and slapping, Moosey admitted defeat. "I guess we're standing in the wrong spot," she said. "But look at those amazing stars! You know, girls... the stars are *nature's* fireworks."

I'm not sure how we all got back to camp that night. But soon afterwards, we counselors started to rebel. Our defiance began with small, sporadic, fairly innocent acts. Hooter and I taught the kids the usual camp songs, but we also added a punk song called Fish Heads that I'd danced to at dorm parties. It was disgusting and the kids loved it, so we made up some matching hand motions. That week, we started the kids on the chorus whenever we happened to pass Tumb'l'weed on the road.

"Fish heads, fish heads, roly poly fish heads. Fish heads, fish heads, eat them up, yum!" the campers yelled with glee, as Tumbl'weed looked annoyed. She clearly preferred the song about the skunk.

Muffy and Mickey started playing Word of the Day with their third-graders. It sounded okay on the surface, but the words always conveyed subtle, anti-camp propaganda. The first one was "odiferous," as used in the sentence "The latrines are very odiferous today!" This spirit of rebellion simmered until the next to the last week of camp. Then the real trouble broke out.

It started on State Park day, when we gave the girls a break from our relentless schedule of organized activities and just let them play. We'd hiked the mile from the camp to the park that morning, strung out in a double file line on the dusty gravel road. We'd played Red Rover and eaten our sack lunches. Now half the girls waded in a shallow creek and shrieked over imaginary snakes. The other half scrambled up the stairs of the five-story fire tower, where I was standing on the top platform, cheering the climbers on and trying to find a breeze. Most of the other counselors splashed with the kids, while five sat on a picnic table and sipped sodas from the vending machine during their scheduled break.

From my perch above the trees, I spotted the Happy Mobile grinding up the road. The driver's door opened, but I couldn't hear the squeak it always made. Then I saw Tumbl'weed step out. It was the first time she'd appeared at the park all summer. Tumbl'weed walked over to the counselors at the picnic table and started gesturing. Then they all got into the van together, and drove off. They never returned.

By the time we got back to camp after dinner, everyone knew something was wrong. Muffy declared a surprise movie night and set up the projector in record time. Under the cover of darkness and some nature film's scratchy soundtrack, all of the counselors crept silently away, leaving Moosey sitting in the front row by herself. We tiptoed through the shadowy kitchen, heading for the back exit. We were going to look for Tumbl'weed.

Wham! The back door slammed open, and the four missing counselors marched through.

"She fired us!" barked Isis.

"Sssh," Hooter hissed.

My eyes fell on the industrial walk-in freezer. It was the only soundproof place in camp, and we often met there to cool off and complain about Tumbl'weed. I pulled back the heavy steel bar, and everyone crowded in. The bare overhead light bulb swung crazily on its string.

"She fired us," Isis yelled again. "Just because she saw us *taking a break*."

"But we always take breaks at the park," Muffy answered, puzzled. "We take turns."

"But Tumbl'weed doesn't know that, because she never shows up," answered Rabbit.

Smiley jumped in, her voice tight with anger. "Tumbl'weed said that if we couldn't be caring counselors, spending time with the kids, then she didn't want us around at all."

The voices rose and fell. Shock gave way to anger, anger to protest, protest to planning. Fists thumped into open palms. We would never stand for this! In one voice, we assured our hungry comrades who had missed dinner – if you go, we go! Today, we fight!

As I whirled around to leave, I spotted the box. Perhaps all our heated words had melted the frost on its side. I saw the shape – a Girl Scout cookie box, perfectly normal – and then the color: bright green. Only one Girl Scout cookie came in a bright green box. The Thin Mint.

I gasped, then pointed. Muffy pulled the box off the shelf – then another, and another. There must have been a hundred boxes of Thin Mints, an entire arsenal of the most delicious Girl Scout cookie ever produced, hidden right there behind the breaded fish sticks. Not only had our corrupt leaders abused their power. They had also kept the best for themselves.

Need I say what happened next? Everyone knows that Thin Mints taste best right from the freezer. We each grabbed our own box, ripped open the plastic sleeves inside, and started chewing as we marched to the lodge. Anger and mint chocolate fused into a potent chemical cocktail. The fired counselors confronted Tumbl'weed in her office, while the rest of us waited outside. Of course they got their jobs back – she couldn't run the camp without them. And after all, there was only one week left. But I had a speech for Tumbl'weed written in my head, and in the end, I didn't get a chance to deliver it. The words and my anger got stuffed back inside me somewhere, next to the entire box of Thin Mints I'd just devoured.

All those unsaid words – perhaps they explain the last thing that happened that summer. On the final night of camp, the cook finally exhausted her supply of extruded cheese and made spaghetti and meatballs for dinner.

Muffy, Hooter and I supervised adjoining tables. One of my campers picked up a green bean and pitched it down her friend's shirt. Muffy and I traded glances. We knew the drill. It was now or never. It was one of the Ten Commandments of camp counseling: You have only 15 seconds to stop a food fight, before it spirals beyond your grasp forever. The friend tossed a green bean back, then peered over at us, calculating how much trouble she was getting into. Hooter looked at me and raised one eyebrow. I stared studiously out the window. In my peripheral vision, I saw one meatball, two strands of spaghetti, and a hunk of Jell-O fly past -- and then the fury was loosed upon us. The girls shrieked, hands dove into plates as one, and the food fight spread across the cafeteria as quick as a rumor, a shout, a song about freedom raised by a hundred voices. Tumbl'weed stood up and pointed at Muffy, Hooter, and me -- standing at the epicenter, we were obviously the guilty ones. "Stop this!" she screamed, the brim of her hat trembling with the force of her emotion.

Suddenly, I knew what I wanted to do. The unsaid words from the week before rose into my throat. I grabbed Muffy and Hooter and hustled them to the front of the dining room. We leapt onto the stainless steel serving counter, our muddy sneakers skidding on the shiny metal. I nodded to my friends.

"Stop!" we shouted in unison, shooting out our mosquito-bitten right arms, palms out like traffic cops. The kids slowed down to stare at us. I looked straight at Tumbl'weed. I put my left hand on my hip and snapped my fingers. "In the name of love!" I sang.

"Before you break my heart," Muffy and Hooter came in behind me, crossing their hands theatrically over their chests. Then we were singing at the top of our voices, the Supremes in their final, farewell performance. The girls screamed with laughter and pelted us with meatballs. Clouds of spaghetti rose into the air.

"Baby, baby, I'm aware, of where you go," we sang, launching into the first verse. Tumbl'weed started to cry and walked out the back door. It was so loud inside, I never even heard the screen door bang shut.
