

## A Night Drill

Alexander Kaplan (with Alejandro Nalpak)  
Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 21218, USA  
alexander.kaplan@jhu.edu

---

In the end, we all make dust.  
Some of us make sawdust...

Alejandro Nalpak

Happened long ago and far away. Back in his old country, Sandy used to do his lasy-mazy physics (and still does, to his amazement), but for his soul and excitement he was also a part-time dissident; human rights, you know... This doesn't make you popular with the government. When they'd got enough of it, he was thrown out from his research lab, and for ten years was doing (supposed to, at least) some utterly useless research on history of science (you know, like everything was invented first in his dear mother-land...). Sandy didn't have any intentions on doing that stuff either. Since his salary was the lowest on the government chart for his credentials, nobody cared that he kept doing his dear lasy-mazy (paper and pencil, enough for a theorist, you know...). It could've been much worse of course (like doing a very hard menial work in specifically designated for that places, with no salary whatsoever), so it was not for him to complain...

Still, his salary was far from self-sustaining. To make some buck for the living, he then went back to what used to be his boyhood hobby, carpentry, and made it his moonlight business. He'd go out to the countryside in the winter, find a "kolkhoz" (presumably a "voluntary" collectivized farm) or "sovkhoz" (government-run farm) which would need any kind of construction or repairs (like putting a new roof on a 200-cow cow-barn, or anything like that). You bet, plenty of them needed it... So he'd sign a sort of private contract with them (with none of the parties being too much committed), and then come back in the spring with a small crew (four to ten guys), slam away for a couple of months (12-14 hours/day, one rest-day in two weeks...), collect the dough -- whatever he'd be able to finally squeeze out off the customer, -- pay off his guys, and be gone...

It was all manual, hand-tool rough carpentry: a straight-blade ax, a double-handle, two-man saw, double-handle hand-driven drill, a hammer, and ropes... Just an example: using an ax and a string (to keep a straight edge), Sandy would make a square-cross-section beam out of 20 feet long ugly log. He taught his guys to do this and other basic things that an ax-carpenter was supposed to do. A lot of construction engineering went into that too. A cow-barn is not a trivial proposition; wooden beams supporting the roof make a complicated structure with a lot of tenon&mortise joints that are to withstand a heavy load of snow in winter and a suspended-rail system to carry big carts to feed the stock. Sandy got no need for blue-prints; he knew the stuff by heart. It was up to him to figure the things out, and get them done no matter that equipment or even materials were often unavailable.

(And yet, staying at the top of a half-done roof with an ax in his hands, feeling the breeze on his face, the sun on his skin, the smell of freshly cut pine and freshly produced cow-shit, and the sawdust in his hair, Sandy felt almost like a free man, a master of his small universe...)

All right, this was just an introduction. After having been drifting in the biggest city of the land from one rent-room to another for about 10 years (almost twenty rooms all together), Sandy had finally managed to buy an apartment for himself (a small studio, actually) and was happy like a lark; he kissed its floor when moved in.

He spent some time making the place marginally livable by building a bed, bookshelves, and a desk out of scavenged wood, and this was it. But his neighbors figured by then that he was a handyman, and he was neighborly enough to fix this or that for them, for free of course. This makes you popular with ladies, and he tried to be neighborly with them too, if you know what I mean...

There was one lady, though, in the apartment right under his, for whom he wouldn't do anything even if paid. It is not that she was too ugly (well, in truth she was...) or anything; but she was too nasty as a neighbor and in general. Being a card-bearing Commie-party member, she took it a bit too far, and (in some neighborhoods) people wouldn't want to have much to do with a person like that. Her trouble though was she was single (say about 50 year old), and very sensitive (paranoid, the truth to be told) about that, if you know what I mean. See, she got no man to service her neighborly needs, and was a bit frantic about it...

For whatever strange reason she had chosen Sandy as a target for her increasingly aggressive and bizarre man-hunt, and he could do nothing about it. At first it was a playful complaint about his making tool (and other...) noises and the invitation to visit her and talk this over; nice try. Then she knocked on his door at midnight, keeping her nightgown with two fingers next to her throat, with an orange under-ware showing through, and gave him another fantasy about his noises. He'd just returned from his ongoing construction expedition, and was in no mood to talk to her. Besides, he was expecting another (really nice) lady to arrive at any moment, so he simply slammed the door on her. This turned out to be his big mistake.

A few days later, late in the evening there was a knock on his door again. Expecting that commie-lady and getting angry, Sandy pulled his door wide open, and was surprised to see a cop, plump and shorty, who promptly put his foot into the door. Without asking Sandy's permission, he squeezed his plump body into the door and closed it behind him. He smelled by cheap vodka, and his bloated, clay-red nose easily betrayed his devotion to the stuff.

"What the heck you are doing, officer?! -- Sandy asked him not even bothering to be polite. -- You come to my apartment without notice, too late for any official inquiry or search or anything, and even if you want to go into any of that, I see no warrant for that in your hands..."

"Shut up --- the cop yelled at him, -- this is precisely what I am going to do -- to search your cracking place".

Sandy turned the light on and recognized him: it was a "cop on the beat", well, sort of an officer assigned to watch a locality, and to know about its residents, shops, bad guys, etc. Call those guys "sheriff office", I don't know...

"OK, officer, I know who you are, fine, but if you want to search my place, you've got to come here before 10 pm, have a search warrant from the district attorney, and two witnesses."

"You, cracking shit, -- the cop snorted at Sandy -- don't pull this one on me, being smart-ass and all that cracking-educated; I hate guys like that! You know, some people are too educated for their own good..."

A cop with a philosophy, no shit...

"Fine with me, officer, yet you still need that cracking piece of paper, and two witnesses, you know that, I know that, so what you are going to do?"

"I heard from the secret police slick-boys, you are a bad guy on their books, so who cares what you say, -- the cop spited on the floor -- But I don't care about your troubles with them. I am here to act on certain neighbor's complaints, and I intend to search your cracking place!"

It began downing on Sandy what this is all about.

"Look, officer, if you do the search without the warrant, you are in trouble, be I a bad guy or not -- (Sandy've got to try...) -- but look, let us try to be reasonable. What exactly you are looking for? I might be accommodating, it depends, you know..."

The cop announced, "I want to see your night drill".

Sandy was dumb-folded. "A NIGHT DRILL? What night drill !!?"

"The one you use heavily at nights here, and while doing that, make a lot of nasty noises!"

On a knee-jerk impulse, Sandy's hand jumped to his zipper: "Oh, this one???!!"

This drew the cop up the wall.

"Not this one, you cracking bastard!!! Everybody's got this one!!! I mean a real one, with a handle, and those ... toothy wheels ... you know, and a big drill bit, shiny and sharp, you know ..."

Sandy tried to be helpful, "Hmmm... how big, officer? Mine can be shiny, all right, given the right conditions, you know... But sharp?!... Nobody would appreciate it, officer, would they..."

However, there was "no use in jiving"; the cop wouldn't take any of that. Out of his bag, he pulled a piece of paper with handwriting on it and shoved it into Sandy's face. Most likely, the cop was not supposed to do it (the confidentiality of informer!), but what the heck, he didn't care. In that sheet, in a neat lady-handwriting, there was a complaint that Sandy, with two other bad-looking "black-ass guys", worked late at night using noisy drill to manufacture boxes for apple transport and secretly sell them later on to the underground apple dealers. ("Black-ass" -- the commie-lady was referring here to the mountain natives of Caucasus, dark-skinned, macho-looking handsome people.)

"Hey, officer, -- Sandy cried out -- this is a pile of sick balloney! The lady is crazy in any medical sense; you know that as well as anybody else! And, do I look to

you as a "black-ass guy"? I don't mind to be one, but I am not. Wanna see my ass? Second, do you know how the "apple box" look like? It is just a few thin planks kept together by staples, with no single drilled hole in them. Third, do you know how I make my living?" --

Here Sandy shoved into the cop's face his recently published book with a lasy-mazy physics title and his name below. No need for the cop to know that the book brought Sandy less dough than two weeks of cow-barn slamming --

"Now, officer, will you be so kind as to give me my little cracking privacy in my little cracking place and leave?!"

The cop was not impressed. "It is all as well, -- allowed he, -- but I am going to search your place anyway. Or do we have anything else here to talk about?"

All right, all right, Sandy was slow that evening. It only now dawned on him at last that this is why the cop is here; it was his racket, collecting a little "lamb-under-thumb" dough (well, sort of free-hand translation) using that little piece of hand-written paper. Who needs witnesses for that, right?

It was OK; happened all the time. Say, on Sandy's construction expeditions, a local cop with a sun-burned face would drive in on his moto-bike, and yell, "Hey, you cow-shitters up there, you have any papers on you?!" The country cops were simple boys; it would cost Sandy a bottle of vodka, no problems. A basic unit of currency in the land... But this one was a city cop. Most likely, his would be a cash proposition to leave Sandy alone. Sandy's problem was that he was short on cash at the moment (and any other moments too), and you never knew how much this cop would aspire for. Besides, Sandy hated the idea of paying this cop off: too nasty a cop. But he had to come up with something, at least to pull the price down.

"OK, ok, -- Sandy said, -- go ahead and do whatever you damn want. What with a gun on your damn fat belly, what can I do? But look here: you make your first move, and I sit down at that damn kitchen table and write a damn cracking letter to the city attorney. For bad guy or not, I still have some connections in that damn cracking office, and you are going to loose your nice no-sweat job forever!"

Bluffing, bluffing!!! -- of course the cop suspected that much, almost knew that, but how would he be 100% sure of that? You never knew who was whose friend; at least you knew that nobody's ass was safe...

Uttering dirty comments about Sandy and his cracking attitude, the cop began reluctantly inching toward the exit door. But it was not a good idea to let an unhappy cop go completely empty-handed. Sandy dived into his small freezer and pulled out a slightly used bottle of vodka.

"Look, officer, we are not fighting here, are we? I'd say instead of having this ... funny ... conversation here, you better go directly to that lady's place downstairs, and help her ... hmm... to relax, you know... The police helping people in their daily needs; got my drift?... And it would be easier for you to do it if you keep this little token of my ... hmmm ... whatever..."

The bottle magically disappeared in cop's bag; good sign! He left without so much as saying "Bye". Sandy listened to his heavy footsteps in the staircase; he went directly

out, never stopping at any floor.

Later on, Sandy figured out how to handle the lady, but this is another story. He'd never seen that cop again; the word in the street was he became too drunkard even for his job. Some years later Sandy left that land, "where a man is free". He came to the States 20 years ago, with two suitcases and hundred bucks in his pocket, ready to look for a carpenter job. He brought with him his cotton-inlaid winter jacket, labor-camp issue, heavy army boots and his ax (with two spare handles).

He flew directly to that city at the banks of Charles-River, and next day after arrival went to a nearest construction cite. Rough-looking guys out there were building a house with 2x4's and particle-board sheets; Sandy thought, "no sweat, I can do it." Tough luck, though. Here is why. He went also to that monstrous super-duper-university sprawled along Charles-River, and started talking to people. It turned out that his research was well known to some of them. They ruined Sandy's dream of becoming an American carpenter. In a few weeks Sandy'd got a research position in that place, then his first research grant from that high-flying agency, then consulting in that great lab in NJ, and the rest is history. He dived head-first into his research (12-14 hours/day etc, see above), went later on for five years to work in that great engineering school in Indiana, than moved back to the East Coast and got stuck there.

But then the ancient call of Wood caught up with him again. Under a shallow pretense of necessity, he drove up to the nearest flea-market (he was still that cheap), bought himself a few tools, and was back into business. Not construction or contractor anymore, just home stuff. Of course, by now he has Delta Con-TS and routers, clamps are found under his bed, and sawdust falls out from his ears at faculty meetings. But the old night drill... it is still around... No cop would come knocking on his door because of its wild use, but the drill is OK; it works.

Sometimes, however, in his night dream, Sandy sees himself at a cow-barn roof, with an ax in his hands and a bright blue sky above him, and he knows that his youth is calling on him from long ago and far away...