

SEEING RED

IT WAS HIM, ALRIGHT. The chest was sunken now, the clothes draped loosely off his once-athletic frame, the gravel voice a bit higher in pitch. Red Bogart was ninety-one and dying, and even still his physical presence was enough to instill a sense of abject fear in an accomplished professional with a wife, a mortgage, and a kid on the way.

I had heard about his latest cancer through the camp's informal alumni circuit, that this time it was malignant, that there would be no reversals. At first I didn't believe it; he had fought off cancer before. Or perhaps the cancer had just retreated in terror. The old man had always seemed invincible, practically a god: all-knowing, all-powerful, distant, occasionally benevolent, generally frightening. But the news came in the fall of 2005, a year in which I had already buried my grandfather. Even the Old Man on the Mountain, that granite face up in Laconia we had driven past so many times on camp field trips, had come tumbling down. Nothing lasts forever. Not even Red Bogart. I wasn't going to let it come to that without a final audience.

"Mr. Lamster," he said. "Come in." He seemed happy for the visitor, though he clearly didn't remember me. We sat in his living room, which opened out onto the gray expanse of Newfound Lake—"the third cleanest lake in the United States," or so he had assured us years ago. I glanced around at the walls, looking in vain for some sign of Tomahawk, the boys camp Red had founded in 1951, and which I had attended every summer from 1979 through 1984. The very spot on which we sat had been occupied by a bunk, "Commanche," that was my home during the summer of 1983. It was now Red's condo. The whole camp had been transformed into condos: Fifty-odd vacation homes painted white and pastel blue where our bunks once stood. Red had done that in 1986. I don't think I'll ever forgive him.

Back in those halcyon years when Tomahawk was still there, Red lived in a shingled Victorian on territory that was off limits to campers. He was married then, to a handsome Belgian woman named André who eventually left him. He was a big, strapping man with a commanding presence—he looked like Eisenhower and he had the swagger of John Wayne. His power radiated palpably across the camp, an invisible ruthless energy. "You wanna see Red?" The threat was enough to reduce any misbehaving camper to tears, and so it almost never

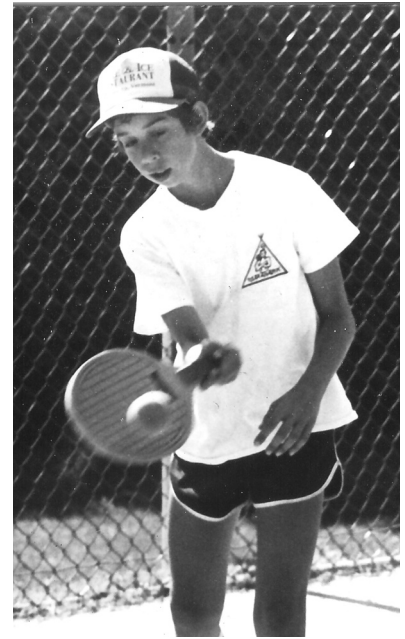
came to that. Red exercised his authority from a distance and through intermediaries, though there were signs of him everywhere, the most prominent being his car, which he parked out by the head office, for all to see. He drove a silver Mercedes sedan with a monogrammed license plate—REDBO—this at a time when monogrammed license plates were a rarity and the idea of Jew with a German luxury car still raised an eyebrow. In camp, he rode around on a four-wheel ATV, like some modern-day general surveying his troops on horseback. Except he didn't have troops. He had two hundred over-privileged adolescents from the likes of Scarsdale, Great Neck, and Roslyn.

He treated us like troops, though, and we loved him for it even as we feared him. He wrote us a fight song. "And then it's fight for Camp Tomahawk, never give in. Fight till the end boys, might and right will win." He made us feel like we were a part of something bigger than ourselves, an invincible unit. We were going to come back as counselors. Someday we'd send our own kids.

Interaction with Red came primarily in the camp dining hall, a ranch-style appendage to an older building, enclosed by sliding glass doors. On its walls were plaques and banners and a series of pastel-colored posters that promoted the camp's Spartan values: Mental Toughness, Courage, Discipline, Desire, Sportsmanship, Conscientiousness. At mealtimes, Red would occasionally lead us in song—old war ditties and Tin-Pan-Alley fare. He loved an audience, and he had a good, strong voice. "Cigarettes and whiskey and wild, wild women, they'll drive you crazy, they'll drive you insane." That was a favorite. We ate it up. There were quizzes on military history and other trivia, for cash prizes. He asked the same questions every year. Recite the second stanza of the "Star Spangled Banner." (Hint: it's not part of the National Anthem.) One summer I won ten bucks for remembering the names of the opposing generals at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, in the French-Indian War.

We'd get songs and contests when Red was in a good mood, which he usually was not. For the most part there were stern lectures braced with military history. These typically came on the heels of some incidence of slackness on our part, either real or imagined: campers showing up late to morning flag raising or an epidemic of sloppy bunk-keeping. "You think you've got it tough?" he'd bark. We didn't know from tough.





He put himself through Indiana University during the Great Depression. He busted his ass to become an All-American swimmer. He parachuted behind enemy lines with the 101st Airborne during the Normandy Invasion.

At Tomahawk, Red was building strong American boys in his own image. The men of his greatest generation had subdued the Nazis; the Russians were still a threat. If we campers didn't shape up, they'd soon be planting their hammer and sickle on Bell Island, a tiny bump in the middle of Newfound Lake we'd use for the occasional overnight under the stars. The "Russians on Bell" became a running joke, and an ironic one given that Red—*Red!*—ran the place like a mini totalitarian state. There was uniform dress, an absence of consumer goods (we got canteen only once a week), a thriving black market (the currency was candy instead of cigarettes), and a system of informants and surveillance that would have impressed the Stasi. Red and his minions saw all. We were convinced the bunks were bugged. We knew our mail was read. Eventually I started taping paper flaps over postcards home. Still, our hidden candy supplies were discovered, our plans for pizza parties and bunk raids foiled. It was like "Stalag 17," without the Germans.

But the truth was that we had it good, as Red was wont to remind us and as we knew well ourselves. Our summers were full of joy: friendships made and renewed, self-discovery and growth, play from morning to night, supportive counselors, traditions passed on. If there was discipline, it only bonded us together. Yeah, the food was terrible, but we had hatchet hunts and capture-the-flag, talent shows and sleep lates, ringolevio and color war. And of course Tomahawk was a showplace. Sweeping lawns and pristine athletic fields, all immaculately groomed. A lake with crystalline water. Handsome wood-frame bunks. Tennis courts so perfect that we hosted

the tri-state camp tournament every year. We loved the place. Red gave us something special, and it instilled in us a sense of proud arrogance—a sense we could feel emanating from Red himself. It was no wonder the real-estate men came calling. Still, when we saw the surveyors taking their measurements, marking the trees that would come down with painted Xs, we didn't believe the rumors. Red would never sell the place. How could he?

Perhaps the camp was too perfect. Every summer there'd be a screening of the film "Meatballs," in which the lovable losers of Camp North Star face off against the evil rich kids of Camp Mohawk. Bill Murray was hilarious, sure, but the conclusion was inescapable: We were Mohawk. Put a "To" in front of Mohawk and you practically have Tomahawk. And we had no place for lovable losers. I learned this the hard way; in my first years I was one, if not always so lovable. I reformed. I gave up arts and crafts, and focused on my tennis game. "A winner never quits, and a quitter never wins," Red told us. So I pressed on. Red was building winners at Tomahawk. Hell, our camp was named for a war implement. Tomahawk. Think about that. Would you send your kid to Camp Machete?

Of course we always suspected that the mythology Red had constructed for himself was bullshit. Before driving up for that last visit, I did some enquiring about his claims. No Borgart had ever lettered in swimming at the University of Indiana, nevermind the All-America honors. I didn't even attempt to solicit his "war records." I suppose he had fabricated his persona as much for our benefit as his. He made of himself a genuine American icon: an athlete, a war hero, a man amongst men. That's what we boys needed, he'd figured, and what did it matter if it wasn't exactly true? It had the ring of truth, and to look at him you could believe every word of it. I think he convinced himself.



But the question remained: Why had he sold the camp, his great legacy? Years ago, one college summer, I made the trip up to see Red with my five closest friends, all Tomahawk alums. We showed up unannounced. We were there to ask the question. Then Red answered the door, and it was like we were all twelve again. We melted, just happy to be in his presence. The question we asked: Which old standby did he recommend for dinner, Tenney Mountain Steak House or the Mill Stream, a local tavern. The reply: “Tenney Mountain is fuckshop, Mill Stream is jerkoff.” We got pizza.

This time I wasn’t going to let it go, and as our final conversation came to an end, I put it to him gently. He consid-

ered it for a moment, and then answered. “I had enough of it when I saw the change in attitude of the children. It was a case of the tail wagging the dog, the parents being ruled by the children, a lessening of respect for the counselors. So I’d had enough.” I stewed about that on the drive home, castigating “the kids today,” with their GameBoys and their TMs and their sense of entitlement. Then I thought of the real estate surveyors stalking around camp in those final years. He wasn’t talking about the kids today. He was talking about us.

A few months later he was gone.

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