
Contributor's Note

Michael Martone was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana. He attended Indiana University in Bloomington, where he lived in Brown Hall, one dorm in a quadrangle of buildings each named for nearby counties—Brown, Greene, Monroe, Morgan. His dorm was part of the Living Learning Center, which operated as a small, more intimate college within the much larger, anonymous university. At the Living Learning Center the self-motivated and ambitious students that the program attracted put on plays, published their own newspaper and literary magazine, and maintained a darkroom and an art gallery. Weekly, the students held poetry readings in the coffee house they converted from the old television lounge. A future governor of the state of Indiana, who later became a United States senator mentioned frequently as a vice-presidential candidate, lived right down the hall from Martone. Martone lived with the sons and daughters of university professors and lawyers and doctors, but the dorm also housed a contingent of varsity swimmers, just as obsessive as their nonathletic neighbors. The swimmers were part of the famous team coached by Doc Councilman. The pool was nearby, arguing for the billeting of its users in the Living Learning Center. Martone would be awakened very early when a pod of swimmers banged down the hallway and stairwell on the way to train. Next door, Martone's neighbor, who played on his record player, constantly and too loud, Gordon Lightfoot singing "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," was washed up at eighteen years old as a competitive swimmer. He had taken up intercollegiate water polo to remain eligible for his scholarship as his splits for the individual medley had fallen off. Martone knew that he still shaved down, trying through the ritual to coax a few more tenths of seconds from his hairless body. Also on Martone's floor was Jack Donahue, who would become an assistant secretary of labor during the first Clinton administration. One evening Jack invited Martone to his political science class being held in the dorm's coffee house. The teacher was conducting an educational game that simulated, Jack said, the dynamics of world politics and international economic systems. The class was small and needed bodies for the simulation to work. Martone, who wasn't doing anything but listening to "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," was quite happy to participate. Once in place, Martone was assigned a role of a small, poor African republic recently liberated from a colonial past. The professor had actually dealt out cards to all the students and their dragooned volunteers to see who would be what nation-state.

Most of them were small, poor countries, though some were large, poor countries. Only a few got to be countries like the United States or Germany or Japan or France or Great Britain. Those countries got to draw cards from a special deck while Martone and the rest received cards from a deck dealt by the professor. The cards the players received contained information pertinent to their nations for the year the hand represented. Martone learned of his country's booming population, its declining food production, its outbreak of disease, and a minor guerilla incursion on its border. The numbers indicated that famine was imminent, disaster on the horizon. After all the participants assessed the cards they had been dealt, the game called for a period of negotiation among its players. The poor countries appealed to the rich ones for assistance—aid of some metric tons of surplus food or advisers to train their struggling militias. At first the players who held the rich countries were generous with their wealth, but as further hands were dealt and the demands upon their largesse increased they became more cautious, demanding more natural resources or labor from those countries who asked, round after round, for more assistance. That was the point of the game, of course, for the students who controlled the wealth to discover how easily they became greedy, indifferent, and callous even when nothing really was at stake but these abstractions. Martone dreaded approaching the student who held all the cards during the diplomacy session. A significant percentage of Martone's population was now starving while it continued to multiply vigorously. His one liquid commodity of industrial diamonds had fallen into the hands of tribal warlords. First one and then another and another of the first-world countries had during their meetings asked him simply what was in this relationship for them. At last, after the next hand was dealt, Martone looked at his cards and realized that everyone in his country was dead or dying though babies were still being born. His country was a desert. Its forests had all been burned for fuel, its animals poached. Its polluted rivers were all diverted to neighboring countries for aborted power schemes. Its once abundant lakes were silted and brackish. The tribe that once lived on floating islands of reed, making distinctive basketry from the same versatile fiber, was now scattered or emigrated to Europe to work as taxi drivers or street vendors. Martone turned the cards back over on his desk. And during the negotiation session, as the participants milled about the room seeking audiences and making deals with each other, Martone went out for a drink of real water, deciding as he drank that he wouldn't go back in for another round. Instead he walked out onto the quad at night and made his way over to the pool, where he watched his dormmate play water polo.

The bobbing rubber-capped heads of the players looked like balls floating on the surface of the water. Then the ball that was actually a ball and not another bobbing head would go sailing down the pool, the floating heads below turning slowly in the water to watch it go by. "Lake Superior, it is said, never gives up her dead," Martone thought as he watched. It was days later in the cafeteria at lunch that Jack Donahue sought out Martone to tell him how impressed his professor had been with the way Martone had played the game. This surprised Martone, since from his perspective he had captained his country to a devastating end. But an interesting thing had happened that night, Donahue told him. Several rounds of the game, perhaps as many as five or six turns of hands being dealt and negotiations conducted, had been played before anyone noticed Martone's absence. Then the scattered pile of cards he had left behind was discovered, and the narrative of his country's decay and doom was archaeologically reconstructed from its relics. This, then, had been the lesson all along, this dwindling and disappearance. No one had even noticed as a whole nation vanished. That's what happens in the real world, the professor had said. It hadn't been a simulation at all. This appearance of invisibility had been the whole point, and Martone hadn't been there to see it.

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