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 countries. Only a few got cards from a special deck, Germany or Japan or France. Martone learned of his country’s production, its outbreak of disease, and information pertinent to its border. The numbers indicating the population were small. After all the players had drawn cards, the game called for a period during which the countries appealed to the other countries for tons of surplus food or aid. The players who held the cards increased they became more demanding or labor from those countries. As the players who controlled the wealth and power increased they became more demanding or labor from those countries. That was the point of the game. Martone looked at his cards and realized that the wealth was not in the hands of those who controlled the wealth and power but as further hands were drawn the numbers fell and increased they became more demanding or labor from those countries. Martone drew cards during the diplomatic negotiation session. One of his neighbors had historically received surplus food and the number of his country’s population was now starving. 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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 Ger­
many 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
d 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.