

CAMP BIG POCONO

As I pulled into the Uniontown Field parking lot, I immediately saw there were no spots, which was hardly surprising. After all, this was the championship game, it had started an hour before, and the lot could only hold about 20 cars.

“I’m going to go park the car,” I said to Jennie, my six-year-old. I then peered through the fence to try to get a read from the body language of the Wildcat pitcher as to who might be winning. “You can get out and I’ll be right back,” I added unnecessarily, as Jennie had already unbuckled and was scrambling out the door. The pitcher looked energized, not a good sign. My son, Kobe, was on the other team, the Bulldogs. So intent was I on trying to figure out what was happening, that I totally lost track of Jennie. There was no room to turn around, so I would have to back out of the crowded lot creeping, since for all I knew she could be behind the car. But she was nowhere in sight and I assumed she had run to the field. She wouldn’t really watch the game, but she liked climbing the trees that fringed foul territory down the left field line.

Because it was the big game, there was an announcer on the field. And as the Wildcat pitcher retired the final batter of the inning, and I slowly backed out and turned around, I thought I heard the announcer recounting the score.

“At the end of three innings, it’s the Bulldogs 6 and the Wildcats 2.”

I smiled weakly. No lead was safe in a little league game. I had learned that two years before.

As I drove slowly down the street looking for a spot, I remembered the championship game of that year. Kobe had been in that one too, his first year of little league at age 8. In fact, Kobe had made it to the championship game all three years that he played. He mostly played right field that first year. I was sitting in the bleachers behind the left field fence right next to the parking lot for that game and I didn’t really have a great view of him.

Kobe’s team had taken a three run lead into the bottom of the final inning. There were two out and two on when a grounder was hit to short, manned by the most sure-handed player they had. But he misplayed it loading the bases and bringing up Robert, one of the league’s stars.

My thoughts (as they typically do) gravitated towards the negative, and I entertained the nightmare fantasy of the ball being hit Kobe’s way, Kobe misplaying it, and the opposing team winning. And sure enough, Robert drove the ball deep into right center field. The ball wasn’t particularly difficult to corral, and a good player could have caught it.

But the good players don’t play right field in Little League.

As Kobe and the centerfielder desperately but gamely chased after the ball, Robert raced home with the winning run into the arms of his jubilant teammates. I watched as Kobe dejectedly walked back to the infield.

But it wasn’t Kobe.

Kobe was walking up from the bench area. He had sat out the inning; one player had to sit each inning since they had more players than positions.

This engendered an odd mix of feelings in me.

I felt good that Kobe had not been the one to lose the game.

I felt bad that his coach had so little faith in him that he chose the final inning as his inning to sit out.

I felt good that Kobe was not crushed as he and one of his friends somewhat obliviously walked towards the parking lot, chatting and laughing.

I felt bad that Kobe was not crushed as he and one of his friends somewhat obliviously walked towards the parking lot, chatting and laughing.

But mostly, I felt totally at a loss to know what to say to or do for Kobe..

In the car those two years ago, Kobe's mood did change. He was upset that he wasn't playing in the field that last inning, sure that he would have caught the ball. This had been a bit of a recurring theme during the year.

“Why can't I play the infield?”

“Why can't I pitch?”

“I'm the best hitter on the team.”

In the years following, my wife, Robin, would be the point guard for Kobe's Little League interface, largely because she became a coach and coached his team. In any event, she was the athletic one, coming from a family of fine athletes. My family...well, they weren't athletes. Maybe I would have been an exception, but polio had robbed me of the use of one leg and half of the other. So not only did I fail Kobe genetically, I wasn't really in a position to even have a catch with him.

But there was no excuse for not knowing what to say to my son at moments like these. And I think the problem was exacerbated by the fact that I clearly knew what not to say.

Kobe might well (and, as it turned out, did) develop and improve as a ballplayer. But he was not a natural athlete. You could see the standout athletes in these games, even at age 8, 9, 10. I loved watching them play. I had had my share of fantasies about Kobe (similar to the ones I had about myself when I was his age). But I knew that there was no greater burden on a child than his parents' dreams for him. I knew better than to ever communicate to Kobe my expectations or disappointments, or my admiration or enthusiasm for one of his friends. So I tended to say nothing.

But I'm guessing kids hear a lot when you say nothing. And whenever I saw one of Kobe's contemporaries shining on the diamond, not matter how circumspect I was in my reactions, it was impossible to completely squelch my admiration for the boy.

Or girl.

Lucy was a small, thin little thing, who could whack the tar out of the ball, run and field gracefully, and throw and even pitch with most of the kids in Little League. She was playing second base on Kobe's team this very moment as I pulled into a spot some two blocks and a daunting hill away. I – and Robin and probably everyone for that matter – loved Lucy.

But for me, she was also a jolt of nostalgia.

The first time I saw Lucy play, and every time since, I found myself sucked back to the late 1950s, Camp Big Pocono, and Carolyn Marcus.

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As a red diaper baby, one would have thought my folks would have sent me off to one of the lefty camps, like Kinderland, Woodland or Webatuck. But they seemed to be

chronically clueless about mainstream culture, even when the mainstream was actually a tributary within their subculture, the American Left. And so I never could understand what made them pick Camp Big Pocono for me (and as was the case for pretty much every similar mystery in my life, I never asked). The camp, located in northeastern Pennsylvania, a couple of miles from Stroudsburg, was a traditional camp for traditional Jews. About half the campers came from New York, the other half from Philadelphia.

So without the benefit of any explanation, I boarded the bus and off I went.

In my Bronx neighborhood, my gang was comprised of the children of socialists or communists. Now I was meeting kids that were just like the kids I had studiously avoided having anything to do with back home. Even more alien to me, the camp had Service every Friday night, and for the first time in my life I was exposed to my own religion. I learned the melodies (that I incredibly remembered 35 years later when, as a part of courting my cantor wife, I started attending synagogue) and got a rudimentary introduction to Shabbos.

As a kid, the music you listen to tends to compartmentalize you. On the left, that meant classical, jazz and mostly folk. Camp Big Pocono's campers listened to rock 'n' roll and show tunes. Most of them had no idea who the Weavers or Pete Seeger were, and the ones who did know dismissed them as commies. I would go to the rec hall and listen to the collection of 45s they played that included most of the contemporary hits. I liked a lot of the music. I actually was quite happy when someone played Johnny Mathis singing *Chances Are* or *Small World, Isn't It*. I was really happy when someone played the Kingston Trio singing *Charlie on the M.T.A.*, until Bernie Schwartz from Brooklyn threw it out the window to the cheers of a group similarly hostile to folk music. (For reasons that never became clear to me, Bernie felt it necessary to come running over to me after the heroic act to tell me he'd done it)

The kids dressed up for these dances. Some of the counselors wore cologne. They combed their hair in the styles of the time. I just put on whatever was up next in my cubby and paid no attention to my hair.

I was definitely interested in girls. So much so, that despite what was to be a lifelong terror of bucking authority, I went on a couple of midnight raids to the girls' bunks (though I lost heart and discontinued those excursions after I tried to sit next to Kandi Serota and she quickly and unambiguously changed her seat). After dinner, when commingling of the genders was permitted for a bit, one of the girls, Darlene, offered to give me back rubs. But it never occurred to me that she might be expressing a romantic interest.

I needed things spelled out.

Romance, or at least sex, was pretty pervasive. There was a masturbation craze that started that first year, with competitions on who could come the quickest (Barry Zwack, less than a minute pretty regularly; he must have been a big hit with the ladies in the years to come) and cock size (hands down – if that phrase is appropriate – to Richie Tropp).

All that spelled out a lot, but explained very little.

I kept thinking maybe I should have “dance” clothes or wear cologne or find something to do with my unruly mop of black curls (little did I know what an asset those curls would turn out to be; little did I know about anything, actually).

But it was not in the rec hall but on the softball field that I began my transformation from nebbish to force to be reckoned with. It took three years, and quickly moved from the softball field to other arenas, but it was a journey I would ever remember.

I played a bit the first couple of times we went down there. But as always in sports, I was a liability, and like in most other spheres of my life, I didn't really feel comfortable asking my bunkmates in bunk 5 to compensate for my limitations. I could play first, maybe even pitch a little. Someone would have to run for me when I hit the ball. And nobody complained. But we weren't even beating bunk 4, kids a year younger, forget about bunk 6.

The team was kind of loosely put together by the counselor and junior counselor. I, relying on some genetic need to organize (my pop had been a union organizer for a while) decided to stop playing and instead become the team's manager.

I changed a few positions around. I put together a batting order that made sense. I talked to them as if they were a team.

Why anybody listened to me or let me do this is another mystery lost to the ages. But they did. And we started winning regularly. That it had anything to do with me is highly debatable. But clearly I wasn't doing anything to stand in the way of success.

But none of this was likely to impress the girls, which was becoming more and more my goal.

I knew exactly what I was looking for too, a leftwing, long-haired Bohemian.

Camp Big Pocono was not particularly fertile ground for this hunt.

However, whatever my mind had in mind, my body had its own ideas. I was a sucker for pretty, there was no doubt about that (Kandi Serota being a case in point). But I was about to find out I was drawn to something else.

And so, as I and my bunkmates trekked our way to the riflery range one morning, we passed some girls playing softball.

And on the mound was Carolyn Marcus.

Carolyn was blond, broad-shouldered and quite athletic in appearance. She was from Philly and a CBP veteran. And as I watched her windmill the ball in, I was awestruck. I have no recollection if I thought she was pretty or not at that moment. But watching her pitch, I knew I was looking at a thing of beauty.

And I was hooked.

I quickly learned her name and that it was pretty well accepted that she was far and away the most accomplished girl athlete in camp, maybe the most accomplished athlete girl or boy. And for all the confidence and swagger she radiated on the playing field, no one could talk about her without mentioning how modest and unassuming she was.

She was a star.

As the days went on, my crush on her just grew and grew. But any notion of my coming on to her at that point (even just introducing myself) was laughable. There was a very daunting abyss between us: the huge gap between an obscure newbie and one of the camp's crown jewels.

But even at 12 years old, I loved a challenge.

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As I made my way up the hill towards Uniontown, I became increasingly nervous. What is this investment we have in things totally out of our control, like rooting for a baseball team. True, there was the practical consideration of how much consoling was going to be required for my wife and son if the Bulldogs lost. But the person who was going to need the most consoling was me. As I slowly made my way in the 90 degree heat up the hill, my thoughts moved from Kobe's first year loss to the championship game of the following year.

That season, Kobe's second in little league, had been a treat for me in many ways. Kobe's game improved; my attitude did also. I was at a number of games and got to know the team.

Including Lucy.

Like with Carolyn so many years before, I had no idea if Lucy was pretty or not. She was just really talented in a way that captivated me. I had similar feelings about other teammates or friends of Kobe who really excelled in one thing or another. I was fifty when Kobe was born, he was my first kid. But I had spent a lot of time with kids in my life, I really enjoyed them, and was drawn to the really talented ones (as opposed to my wife, whose maternal and teaching instincts seemed to be most stimulated by kids who were struggling or in trouble).

And I soon added to my list of fantasies about Kobe, the fantasy of Kobe and Lucy someday hooking up.

In that second season, Kobe was still in right field, occasionally at second base, and once in a blue moon they let him pitch a little. There were better pitchers on the team (Lucy among them). And he hit pretty low in the batting order. But he busted his ass when he hit the ball, and knew how to work out a walk, and he became one of the better bunters on the team, using his speed (inherited from his mom) to great advantage.

The team went on to have a terrific season, and made it to the championship game. Because they were still the "minors," their game was in the morning, which crushed Robin who worked Saturday mornings. She blew off the 9:00 Torah study but she would have to conduct the bar mitzvah at ten-thirty, which meant leaving the game at 10:00, when it was barely an inning old. She left me with strict instructions to call her with game updates that she could check on her cell at every opportunity.

The game was exciting. I was amazed how evenly talented the teams in this league were, or at least how competitive most of the games were. Earlier rounds had seen one or two blowouts, but for the second straight year the championship game was close. Kobe's team trailed by a couple of runs early, and then came back to build a four-run cushion which had eroded by the final inning to just one.

The opposition loaded the bases with two out.

But then Dante came up.

Dante was one of Kobe's friends. A really sweet, engaging kid, and endearingly offbeat in many ways, Dante's talents (and more tellingly, his demeanor), did not translate well to this kind of competition.

Dante walked to the plate as behind him his teammates heaved a collective sigh of despair. One could almost hear a disembodied voice intoning: Abandon all hope.

When he waved at strike three, Bulldog arms shot up in the air and the kids formed that familiar amorphous mass on the field as the announcer shouted out the final

score and the obligatory congratulations. I had been running a pitch-by-pitch account into my cellphone for Robin, and I now put it away and picked out Kobe to see who he was embracing or who was embracing him.

It wasn't Lucy.

We went to the pizzeria in town to celebrate with some of the other players. Kobe particularly wanted to sit with Matt, who had played on the losing team. I watched, astonished at the resilience Matt displayed, as despite the crushing defeat, he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying lunch.

And his friends.

I beamed at Kobe, who had made two key catches in right field (and just missed what would have been a terrific catch in right center).

I wished Lucy was there.

I wished Kobe wished Lucy was there.

These memories of year two occupied me until, as I neared the field, I could hear the announcer.

“And that's the final out. But the Wildcats strike for three runs, and in the middle of the fourth it's the Bulldogs 6, the Wildcats 5.”

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I didn't think often of Carolyn during the school year following that first summer at camp. As I floundered through 9th grade there were other girls for me to moon after. But there was no question but that I wanted to go back to camp the following year. I had unfinished business.

I was now in bunk 6. There were a lot of returnees, some new folks, and of course, Carolyn. But she was, to my thinking, as unapproachable as ever. Not because she radiated “stay away” signals, but because I felt like I wasn't even a blip on her radar.

And it's not like I had any expectations about her, or even a plan. All I knew was I was driven in certain directions in my life. And all too frequently the driving force was my desire – make that *need* for romance.

During my first summer, among the many new experiences I had was Color War. The camp was divided into the Blue team and the White team (Jewish camp, remember, plus those were the color clothes almost everyone had) and for a week we engaged in athletic competitions, with the winning team getting points for each game won. On the final day, which was a Saturday, the two teams would compete in the “Sing,” in which they each sang five songs, the music taken from popular or show tunes, the lyrics written by the counselors. I had trouble distinguishing the “categories” for each song, but there was a fight song and a march and a couple of others, and then the alma mater. Points would be awarded for each song based on how well they were performed. The points for winning a sporting event paled in comparison to how much you got for the Sing (maybe to even the playing field, maybe to stress culture over athletics – Jewish camp, remember), so typically the Sing decided everything.

I immediately got into it. My team, White, won that first year, and I loved the energy, the competition, and mostly winning. Carolyn was on my team which helped enormously in the sports. I competed where I could, like swimming.

But I was fascinated by the Sing and the writing of the songs.

For some inexplicable reason, I, at the age of 8 or 9, while walking home from school one day, started making up words to the incredibly popular Davy Crockett song, writing lyrics about keeping the streets clean, which was a somewhat ubiquitously promoted campaign in the City at the time.

Litter, New York litter

A terrible sight to see.

I wrote several verses and showed it to my folks who encouraged me to show it to my teacher. The school sent it off to Mayor Wagner's office, and I got a special commendation for the song.

So I knew the drill and I had the skill.

And as Color War approached, I found myself writing a Color War song.

There is inspiration and motivation; two different things. I never thought of myself as inspired. That seemed to be reserved for "real" writers. I thought of myself as motivated. The need to shine, to star, to be somebody, to get on the radar of all the Carolyns I would ever meet motivated me to create.

For a tune, I had found myself stuck on "On the Steppes of Central Asia," by Alexander Borodin, a favorite composer of mine at the time. Of course, picking such an obscure classical selection would have been completely inappropriate for a Color War song. The tunes needed to be ones that were familiar to the kids so they could learn them quickly. But Borodin's music had been popularized in the hit Broadway show *Kismet*, and one of the melodies from "Steppes" had been used for the song *Sands of Time*.

I ended up with:

Sands of time, swiftly fall

Campers here will e'er recall

CBP how we love thee

Yes we'll all return next year

Okay, not great, even for a 13 year-old, but definitely in keeping with the kind of lyrics that typically were used in the alma mater, the fifth of the five songs performed at the Sing.

I showed it to the general of my Color War team (White again; Carolyn on my team again) who seemed to like it, but they had an alma mater already which they preferred to go with.

And apparently it was good enough to enable White to win again.

Another summer passed without me scoring with any of the girls up at camp, certainly not Carolyn. And this was to weigh on me heavily.

But I had gotten my feet wet.

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Kobe lead off the bottom of the fourth. He worked the count to three and two. The kids were encouraged to swing and not to work out walks, by the umpires and the coaches. With the size of the strike zone for these little kids and the general skill level of the pitchers (who were limited to a sixty pitch count, so you had to use several every game), umpires tended to enlarge the zone, particularly on the high end. Kobe watched a third strike go by.

That was actually the only at bat of Kobe's that I got to see that season. With mom coaching the team, my job had been to take care of Jennie.

The Bulldogs didn't do any damage in the inning.

In the top of the fifth, the Wildcats got the lead runner on base. He then attempted to steal second. The peg from Jonah, the catcher, Lucy, and the runner all arrived at the base at the same time, the ball coming in on a hop. Lucy lost her balance trying to avoid the runner but was able to backhand the short hop and slap the tag on the runner as she was falling down. This sapped a lot of energy out of the Wildcats who proceeded to go down meekly.

The Bulldogs followed suit in the bottom of the fifth.

Little League games were six innings long, so it was three outs to go.

Robert, the kid who had beat Kobe's team two years before, was now his teammate and was pitching. His pitch count was up there. He was their best pitcher so they wanted him to finish out the game.

The first batter for the Wildcats popped the ball up to the middle infield. Matt, the shortstop, and Lucy, the second baseman, converged on the ball. This looked like a classic bump together nobody catches the ball situation. But Matt called Lucy off, and she heard him, deferred, and Matt put it away for out number one.

The Bulldogs were well-coached, which was the hallmark of their success. They played like an actual baseball team. They had players with greater skill sets than other players, but you never walked away from a Bulldogs victory thinking anybody had won the game for them. They won as a team, which was to the great credit of their three coaches, including Robin, who not only taught the fundamentals, but kept firmly in mind that they were dealing with ten and eleven year olds kids who wanted to have fun, and wanted to win. This was a team that trusted one another. It was a team without stars.

The next hitter grounded the ball to Matt at short. I, from my perch standing down the left field line, immediately flashed to the error made on just such a ball as that that opened the floodgates for the Bulldog's loss two years prior.

But Matt fielded the ball cleanly and threw out the batter.

That brought up Gabe.

Gabe was a very intense kid, a very vocal kid, and a terrific athlete. The kind I would normally have been drawn to. But Robin had reported that when the Bulldogs had played their qualifying game two days before, Gabe had been there keeping track of the pitch count, since under Little League rules, the pitch count of any pitcher in that game would be considered if he pitched again in the championship game.

Gabe was asked what he was doing.

"We're just making sure nobody is cheating," he said.

I wasn't drawn to Gabe.

Robert was down to eight pitches left.

He went to three and two on Gabe, and then walked him.

"Did you see that," Gabe complained as he trotted down to first, "he walked me intentionally." Which certainly made no sense since that put the tying run on base and brought up the potential go ahead run in the person of Alex. In the fourth inning, Alex had hit a prodigious 250 foot three-run homer that had actually cleared the fence and fallen into the parking lot.

So Robert was to face off with the most feared hitter in the league.

Matt at short turned to face the outfielders.

“Kevin (the left fielder), Kobe (the center fielder), if he hits the ball to either of you, throw it to me.”

Matt was a take-charge guy, but he was only reflecting the good basic baseball that was the recurring mantra of the Bulldogs.

While the outfield was considered the spot for the lesser skilled players in Little League, at this level a fair number of balls were hit out there. And Kobe’s speed was a great asset, which might have been why he was in center.

Robert had two pitches left before he would have to be yanked. The first pitch was a ball.

Robert’s next (and last) pitch was right down Broadway, and Alex got the fat part of the bat on it and hit a screamer into left center over the outstretched glove of Matt that then headed for the gap.

Gabe raced around the bases as Kobe ran over and cut the ball off.

Kobe unhesitatingly pegged a strike to the waiting Matt, who wheeled around and threw the ball to Jonah, who was standing in front of home plate. The ball hit his mitt as Gabe was sliding between his legs. Jonah applied the tag.

People talk about time stopping or standing still at moments like this. But for me, time simply ceased to exist. This was a moment that would refuse to be locked in, one I experienced as many moments, decades apart, all converging. I stood and absorbed it all as I watched and waited for the umpire’s call.

His hand shot up with the thumb extended.

“Y’er out!”

Gabe was out at the plate.

The Bulldogs were Little League champs.

There was pandemonium on the field as the players, coaches and parents all converged. Even Jennie, who had spent most of the last few innings climbing trees, got it, as she jumped for joy.

Which was way more emotion than Kobe was displaying. Kobe didn’t celebrate winning; he just experienced the relief of not losing.

Just another lousy game I handed the kid, I thought.

Just another expectation.

By the time I had lumbered down to Robin, the initial exhilaration had abated a bit. Eventually there were a few short congratulatory speeches from the coaches before they lined up to do the handshakes with the Wildcats. Matt made a speech that gathered together all the applicable clichés that stressed team play. Everyone was good with that. Nobody wanted credit.

There was a Little League picnic scheduled for later that afternoon. I had baked brownies. I hoped the kids would like them enough to ask who made them. I hoped Lucy would ask.

In the face of this textbook lesson on team play, I still wanted to be a star.

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Bunk 6 was as high as you could go as a camper. If you returned the following year you became a waiter (if you were a boy) or a CIT (if you were a girl). I obviously

couldn't be a waiter so the camp offered to make me a CIT for bunk 1. I even got paid a hundred bucks for the summer, money that I used immediately upon my return in the fall to purchase the Gibson 12-string guitar with which I would be identified in the years to come.

I was happy with this arrangement. I was coming off my first year in high school, and at 14, girls were virtually always on my mind. Two of my closest male friends had lost their virginity that year. But it wasn't just the natural urges of puberty, nor the sense of competition that most drove me.

It was the quest which was to characterize my life, the quest for validation.

Being a counselor meant that the evenings were free for socializing at the rec hall. There was the usual assortment of young ladies, a couple of new ones, and of course, Carolyn. I still could not work up the nerve to put any moves on her, although by now I was much more comfortable chatting her up. She didn't seem to have any other attachments. She was always sweet and friendly. But I would need some significant encouragement before I would try to advance the ball, and that didn't seem to be in Carolyn's nature, even if she was interested in me.

One thing that I felt encouraged by was Leah Cohen. Leah was definitely one of the highlights at Camp Big Pocono. A knockout, she had the effervescence of a cheerleader but without the superficiality. She seemed particularly comfortable performing very capably in the slightly naughty skits that were occasionally put together. But most of all, she loved romance. Being a counselor, she came up early and usually by the time the campers arrived, she had found her summer love. This summer, however, there wasn't anyone there for her among the counselors, and so she set her sights on one of the waiters, Bob Jampol, who had been a bunkmate of mine the year before, and was a year or two younger than her.

It was summer camp. Anything was possible.

I easily glided through the first six or seven weeks of camp, a veteran now and a recognizable personage. However, I was not any closer to Carolyn and not any closer to figuring out a way to get closer to her.

But as Color War approached, I got a huge surprise and a huge break.

Color War teams each had a pair of generals, one of each gender, selected from the counselors. Generally speaking these selections reflected the thinking of camp management of who the most charismatic of the counselors were.

I was picked to lead the White team.

Two or three years the junior of any other counselor, I was caught totally off guard. I was not only not particularly charismatic, I wasn't even particularly mature. My first thought was that they were doing something for the crippled kid. But whatever the reason, I jumped right into the role.

The first responsibility for Color War generals was to meet with the camp directors and select their teams. The generals took turns picking, going bunk by bunk. As I looked at the roster, I quickly did the math (my best subject) and realized when they got to Carolyn's bunk, Blue was going to have first pick. There was no question that she would be selected.

As soon as I figured this out, I stopped the proceedings and without consulting with my co-general, Amy Geller, proposed a trade. This was unheard of, but Leah, who was one of the Blue generals, and who knew a crush when she saw one (despite my

insistence that it was Carolyn's athletic abilities that prompted my request) prevailed on her co-general to acquiesce. He didn't need much convincing, as the overly generous offer I had made would allow Blue to have two of the top male athletes. And so, despite Amy's hostile glare (which I was to see several times in the following week) for the third straight year, Carolyn and I were on the same team.

I'm not a natural leader. I'm not a rah-rah kind of guy, I always felt I was going to lose, and I was lazy. My co-general, Amy, got on me eventually for not being more visible as a general, particularly in light of the hole I had put the team in by my unilateral action in getting Carolyn. But I did have an important contribution to make to the team, and I knew that. I would write songs for the Sing, and I felt fairly confident in that area at least.

Of the five songs needed, I would write three, including the all-important alma mater. Another counselor, Jake Hart, volunteered to write the other two.

He dropped in on me to sort out which songs each would be responsible for.

"See, this is how I do it," Jake explained, taking out a paper and pencil. "I mark off with dashes each note of music," he said, doing so on the paper. "And then I know how many words I need to fill in the blanks. You should try it," he added.

I smiled and nodded and displayed the feigned enthusiasm that I was to become so proficient at as the years went on. I made sure that Jake would be writing the two songs with the least point value, and I would have the more important ones. And then got back to my own writing.

The first two tunes were pretty much in keeping with tradition, but I tried to find different rhymes, to attack the writing with something fresh, and to bring a little humor to the songs. I would, in the years to come, find myself writing these song parodies (for lack of a better term) on a number of occasions. And I was really good at it, largely because I knew my audience, I knew what would please them, how to get them to laugh, and to cry. In fact, my writing was always geared to specific audiences, many times an audience of one: whichever woman I was trying to romance at the time. But I could hack it as a writer.

I had opted for Russian as a language choice in my sophomore year at high school (a logical choice for a red diaper baby, I thought). And Mrs. Karlin had taught the class some Russian songs, including one that had been recently written and recorded there and had become a humongous hit in the Soviet Union. The song was *Moscow Nights*, and it had a beautiful and very Russian melody that sounded as timeless as any folk song. This would be my alma mater.

Once again my instincts served me well. The judges at the Sing would be Jerry Balis, the camp director, and some other board members, all Jews, who would themselves have probably been brought up listening to Eastern European and Russian music. They would certainly find this tune very appealing and nostalgic.

I also had a sense of presentation. Under an August night sky in the Poconos, this song would sound as if it was an organic extension of the bucolic surroundings, capturing perfectly the cruise ship atmosphere of summer camp, where, as the ship nears its home port, everything attains a special significance and intensity, wistfulness and sweet sorrow.

I had performed the song on stage in high school with Sidney Landesman playing his accordion and singing, I playing my guitar and singing harmony. We sang in Russian, of course, but at my suggestion added a verse in English using a translation I had penned.

I knew the song very well.

Unfortunately, the campers on the White team, of course, had never heard of it.

To teach a bunch of kids a song from scratch was a rather daunting enterprise, and certainly unprecedented in CBP Color War history. But the melody turned out to be easy to learn. I adapted my translation somewhat to the camp locations, but really it was pretty much a straight rendering of the original lyric that fit so well. And not satisfied with breaching tradition by using an unfamiliar tune, I also decided on an even more radical departure. I would not mention the name of the camp, in fact, not mention camp at all in the lyrics. I found “Camp Big Pocono,” or as it was frequently rendered in past almas, “CBP” really tacky.

My lyrics were an ode to summer instead:

*Stillness by the lake, not a rustling sound
Softly shines the moon, full and bright
Oh, if you could know how I treasure so
This most beautiful summer night.*

The kids got into it, and even the usually dour Amy was impressed with it, and with the way I finally took charge of my team preparing them for the Sing (although again I had to rely on my ability to feign enthusiasm when rehearsing Jake’s two songs with them).

(Little did I know that within months, this melody, under the title *Midnight in Moscow*, would be recorded by a British pop group named Kenny Ball and His Jazzmen in an up tempo, instrumental version that would chart #2 for three weeks)

Carolyn delivered as always, but White was still trailing going into the Sing (owing largely to the “trade” that had gotten Carolyn on the team). But as was almost always the case, it was close enough that whoever won the Sing would win it all.

It was the day before Visiting Day, the penultimate weekend of the summer. My folks, on their way to Canada for a vacation, had gotten permission to attend the Sing, since they would not be around the following day.

It was a beautiful, clear night. The singing was spirited for both sides. But our singing of the alma mater was transfixing. The kids channeled the whole summer into their performance with an affection that was unmistakable. It was what the Sing was all about.

Amy, I and the two Blue generals were called up as Jerry announced the results.

Blue and White split the first four songs. White won both of my songs, lost both of Jake’s. The way the point total stood, the winner of the alma mater would win Color War.

Jerry took his time.

“And the winner of the alma mater, and of Camp Big Pocono’s 1961 Color War is...”

Time didn’t exist. I had become, in Vonnegut’s words, “unstuck in time.” For the rest of my life, I would be able to go back to this moment any time I wanted.

“White. Congrat –“ but Jerry couldn’t be heard above the roar. The White team campers threw their lyric sheets in the air and pandemonium reigned. I returned Amy’s hug somewhat half-heartedly (because of holding my cane and balance issues, I was

usually a tentative hugger), and because of their proximity to where the generals were standing, my folks were next in line, beaming proudly. I spent a few obligatory moments with them, looking past them all the time.

Looking for Carolyn. That's the hug I wanted. That's the hug I had worked so diligently for. That's the hug, the fantasy of which, had made all this happen.

I hobbled on through the crowd, kids coming over and patting me or reaching to shake my hand (I used my right hand for the cane, so I grabbed their outstretched hands with my left, which tended to disorient them a bit). Some folks had something particular to say, as always happens in these situations, some important insight on how the victory was achieved. I listened as best I could in the din and smiled and agreed.

"Albi!"

And then I saw Carolyn.

She was looking for me.

We didn't hug, we embraced, Carolyn's sturdy grip erasing any trepidation I might otherwise have had.

Time didn't exist.

And I felt validated.

The following day, Visiting Day, was sort of an open day for the campers. They could take their folks anywhere they wanted. Some kids didn't have visitors, like me, and just sort of killed time. For me, the day was spent rehearsing how I would approach Carolyn and ask her to the end-of-summer dance. Her folks were up from Philly, so I had to wait until they left.

When I felt the time had come, I made my way to the girls hill and to Carolyn's bunk. I walked in and she was alone inside, sitting on her bed. Her face beamed broadly when she saw me.

"Hi," I started. "Folks are gone, I guess?"

"Yeah," Carolyn said, still smiling broadly.

"Carolyn," I started, "I was wondering if you'd like to go to the end of summer dance with me."

That wonderful face with its wonderful smile that would only turn grim on the playing field all of a sudden transformed into a jolting mixture of surprise and regret.

"Oh, Albi," I heard how genuinely disappointed she felt, "I wish you'd asked me sooner. I just now said I'd go with somebody else."

"Oh," I said, looking down. "That's too bad."

"Who?" I finally asked.

"Jake," said Carolyn.

Time existed, and I smiled feebly and wished her the best and slowly trudged back to my bunk.

This was to be my last summer at Camp Big Pocono. The following year I was to enter into a totally different era of my life, one that included a fair number of pretty girlfriends. I would never see or speak with Carolyn again, although I did manage to include a Color War monologue in my first play which captured the whole experience rather humorously.

Jake Hart walked into a courtroom where I was working many years later. I saw his name on the appearance sheet, or else I never would have recognized him.

"Jake Hart," I said to him. "Did you go to Camp Big Pocono?"

“Yeah,” Jake said, looking at me curiously and a little bit annoyed to be distracted. This was a big case he was on, to drag him all the way from his Philadelphia practice to the Southern District of New York. They didn’t have court reporters in Philly in any event so he wasn’t in the mood to start chatting up one here in New York.

“Albi Gorn,” I said.

Jake shook his head slightly as he looked me over.

“Nope, don’t remember you,” he said, and started to go back to his fellow lawyers.

“How about Carolyn Marcus,” I asked. “Do you remember her?”

“Nope,” Jake said, in a tone that pretty well convinced me that Jake Hart had absolutely no interest in filling in those blanks.

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My father had dropped out of high school during the Depression, but not before being awarded a math medal, an achievement he alluded to at every possible opportunity. Relegated to a trade (he made false teeth) he transferred his own disappointed dreams onto his sons. My brother, Bill, came through in flying colors, becoming a theoretical physicist and working on some of the most sophisticated projects in the world.

I became a court reporter.

My pop was disappointed in me when I dropped out of college (expelled actually), and I carried that with me throughout my life. At some level I felt that everyone who knew me was disappointed. I tried to compensate by excelling as a writer, first of songs, then plays and prose. But as hard as I tried, I generally felt I was a better court reporter than I ever was a writer. When my dad died, he had long since gotten over his disappointment in me. But it was too late by then; I would never get over my disappointment in myself.

And so I wanted to be sure never to burden my kids with dreams or expectations. Easy to say.

I sat at one of the tables set up outside the elementary school for the Little League picnic. Robin was off celebrating with her co-coaches and pretty much everyone else there. The celebration was not of the victory, but of our town.

Kobe sat with me, and several of his friends joined us from time to time, chowing down on the grilled delights. I noted quite a few kids looking quite content as they munched on my brownies.

Kobe and one of his closer buddies (who played on the Wildcats) ran off to join a huge running bases game. No rules, no umpires, no league, no winners.

At one point I saw Lucy walk by, showing off to some younger kid by flipping a ball behind her back over her shoulder. There was a lot of Carolyn in that swagger, I thought.

I spied Alex sitting on a rock next to a very pretty girl. Their body language was unmistakable. Alex had a year or so on Kobe, but unquestionably Kobe would find his way to some similar rock soon enough.

After all, in a few days he would be on his way to summer camp.

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