

## *Remembering Red*

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On Saturdays, when other Jews sat and stood in synagogue my Uncle Red lay on his back under my father's jacked up 1958 Rambler American in his dark blue work shirt with his name patch, "Red." His given name was Nathan but whoever called him that, I don't know.

He kept a plug of Mail Pouch in his cheek as he changed oil, torqued bolts, tightened belts, tweaked tie rods as my father and I handed him greasy tools or the juice jar, as he called it, so he could spit.

Red had big hands and big shoulders and anchors tattooed on the insides of his forearms, where unluckier Jews of his generation had numbers tattooed on theirs. He said he served on a battleship in the Pacific. That's all he would say.

Summer camp for me was a week every July at my Uncle Red's rough-hewn, cold-water cabin he'd built mostly by himself in Emlenton, PA, in a clearing in the piney woods. It wasn't like the summer camps some of my friends attended: No color wars, swimming trophies, candy drops, ghost stories, archery or sing-alongs. But with Red as my counselor, I learned to bait a line and clean a trout and make a fire and crap in the woods and watch the stars.

When we sat Shiva for my father Red sat with us, too, fidgeting in his blue serge suit and white shirt and tie, holding a Mason jar for his tobacco juice. He sat and said nothing; what could he say, he'd lost his little brother. Before he left the room he stuck

some money into my mother's hand. I followed him outside, and we stood in the harsh March wind and he asked me how I liked being a college boy, and when was I going to come up to the camp to visit, and I said soon, soon as I can. But of course with my term papers and frat parties and protest marches and committees and internships and requisite drugs I never did.

The last time I saw Red his hair was white. The "Sugar"—that's what my mother called diabetes, as if sweetening its name could diminish its effect—had taken his left leg up to the knee before they finally "managed" it. He lived in the Hebrew Home, where poorer Pittsburgh Jews were warehoused if their families couldn't afford or didn't care to spend the money on more gracious private care. I'd brought along a pack of Mail Pouch for sentimental reasons, mostly my own, I guess.

Red through thick glasses recognized me and called me Marky like he used to. He asked about my father and why his little brother never came to visit, and I told him, well, Dad sends his love, and I'm sure he did. Then, for a little while, we talked about fishing.