Christopher Is Dying
Timothy Bostelle

Prologue

Life is fiction. We create things every day: sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, love, fear, anger. All of these and more are created and re-created every day. This is not to say that the world is some tabula rasa and that we come to it like some deity and create a world. Rather, like the sculptor who sees the potential of marble to hold a statue, we chisel out our world, giving chaos meaning and ordering it into useful categories. My favorite example of this is sound. In the physical world sound is merely complex waves of vibrating air molecules which strike our ear drums and vibrate up to the brain and so on. The moment of fiction occurs when the human brain collects these impulses and filters them into something meaningful. Here, the brain literally re-creates coherent sounds from a myriad of vibrations. Without our ability to create meaning from chaos we lose one of the foundations of what being human is—of what living is. In other words, the day we stop creating meaning is the day we essentially stop living.

Our fiction is not absolute, however. We neither live in the solipsistic hell of Nietzsche nor in the absolutely solid world of Newton. There are degrees to how much of the world we create. For example, the physicality of, say, the beer I drink is less created than the meaning placed on that beer. And its meaning is even less constructed than its memory. Thus, in the notion of life as fiction, memory is the least structured of all its components.

If life is fiction then death must be fiction as well for the two are inexorably linked. Think of the act of living as presupposing the act of dying: The two are part of each other. We live. We experience sensations. We create memories to continue the fiction of life, but all the while death is there. Death is thus a part of life. It is the smallest part of life—the kernel around which life revolves. At the same time, when we die, life is there as death’s smallest part as well. This part of death is especially evident in the act of consumption. When a lion kills a deer, there is death, but it is a death that perpetuates life: The lion benefits because it lives to produce more lions. In a strictly
physical sense it is death which sustains life. However, the relationship of life to death in humans has another level. For us, the life kernel around which death revolves is memory. As we die, we pass on to others a seed of life by leaving them with memories of our life. If properly maintained, the seed of memory can grow into a fully creative life—affecting the way others perceive their world. Therefore, death is inexorably tied to life through human memory.

Christopher

My brother Chris lives in memory now. Chris was killed by a car five years ago, five days after Christmas, and seven days after his eighteenth birthday. He was walking home from a friend’s house that night when a car swerved off the road just enough. In that random way, on that random day, he passed from “real” life into memory and gained that which many seek: continued life.

My memory of Chris has its own fictitious life now. I sometimes suddenly remember things about him with strange clarity. Like the way he would wryly smile when I told a bad joke or how we would argue or fight over insignificant shit. I do not dredge these memories up. Rather, they seem to have taken on a life of their own. So, in a sense, his memory fiction is asserting authorship over my memory fiction. It is alive.

But Christopher is slowly dying. We are forgetting him, and so, our memory and ability to create is slowly dissipating. We who loved him need fresh memories, infusions if you will, to keep him alive. He needs fresh minds upon which his memory can work its creative magic. I present these two brief stories of his life to you in an attempt to affect you with Christopher’s memory. Look at his life, his pain and his joy, and let his memory create another life in you, and you will in turn create continued life for him.

Cat food

In 1989 we lived on a street in Mililani, Hawaii that was full of brown on brown townhouses squashed into a six block area. These “houses” were nothing like the movie image of the townhouse where just about every house is distinctive in some way. No, this place had been built by the “King of Conformity”—each house exactly like the other, with the only distinction being the car parked out front or the
flowers planted in our yards. Each “yard” was designed as a two foot by two foot area in the front of each house where some small growth might try to creep out into the light of day. So rarely the surface of our middle-class pond rippled.

Just a few blocks away was the full service strip mall where we could go to get everything from math tutoring to a tin of cat food. These strip malls were also the most unimaginative places on earth—utility and function replacing things like beauty and distinction. In my experience, it was a kid’s job in life to turn these boring places on their heads. There were about ten of us, including Chris, who took this as our task.

We were skaters, and we would drag our jump ramps and our little boom-boxes into their parking lots and onto their side streets just to annoy the hell out of them. Chris and I loved ramp jumping and the general feeling of bringing a little chaos into the lives of people who were so ordered and quiet. But then I started getting too old for this “kid” stuff. Even though I was working and going to summer school I still found time to hang out occasionally with Chris and the guys.

It was a beautiful Hawaiian late summer day and I had just gotten off work. As I got close to home I kicked the board into my hand and cracked open the front door. Mom was standing in the kitchen and I could tell by her demeanor that something was up. My mother always got this strange look about her when one of us was in trouble. She would erase all of the love on her face by flattening her lips into a white grimace. Then, she would walk right past us and in a long dry turn, make eye contact, raising one eyebrow while crinkling the other.

“You know where Chris is?” She looked straight at me with that grotesque look on her face.

“Uhh, no.”

“He got caught stealing at the Safeway and he’s sitting there waiting for your father to come home,” she said. She always called him our “father” when something serious happened.

“Well...” I was trying to sound nonchalant about the whole deal. “What did he take?”

“A can of cat food.”

“Cat food! What for?” I began to laugh at the absurdity of a child being held by police for the dastardly crime of stealing cat food.
"It's not funny. They're going to press charges." For a moment she had gotten very serious and it made me stop laughing. Now she let up a little bit. "He wanted to feed a little kitty."

"They can't prosecute him for that, can they?"

A strip of blue light a million years wide fills my mind. Images of movie sets filled with deteriorating Tom Selleck flashing that macho jock smile juxtaposed with B-class horror film sets move in like the trailer to some memory movie—crowding out the "real" memory. The camera steadies on a blue sky shot and then drops down on the two bodies lying on the burnt summer grass below. Down from the sky the spinning panoramic lens zooms in on Chris’ face. I see the wind lift his long brown hair. It flies about his face, forcing him to constantly pin loose strands behind an ear. His deep brown eyes stare out at the long clouds moving across the parabolic sky.

"Is it REALLY wrong?" Chris says to me as he plucks a long stem of the brown Hawaiian grass and pinches it between his incisors. "All I wanted to do," he says, and with a ‘phut’ spits the end into the air, "was feed a cat. I mean, a little kitty that was hungry. It wasn’t his fault that he was all alone in the world with no one to feed him, was it?"

"It’s not so easy as good and bad, Man," I say. I brush the grass nervously. My mom and dad had told him how bad it was, so who was I to contradict them? Secretly I want to tell him that I am proud of him for standing up for his beliefs. For taking it upon himself to help that cat who seemed so helpless. For not passing by that cat like all the other heartless fucks had.

"You are always trying to find the safe way out, Tim. For me, it’s a lot easier: If we can, we ought to help and accept people who can’t help themselves. You’re trying to please too many people."

Chris shot an accusatory glance at me, hoping to get some rise. I cop out and say, "I dunno."

Stasis

Zap. Ding. Ding, ding, clang. "Damn!" I slap the ball-handled joy stick in animated anger. "I can’t beat this fucking level." Another quarter leaves my hand and is sucked into the belly of the machine. As the opening screen comes up (the one that explains why we must
spend massive amounts of money on this useless game), my eyes slice through the crowded room, scanning for Chris. These places are nothing but eye candy for kids: Everything throbs, flashes, bleeps, and buzzes. The cacophony of sensory input stretches the mind’s ability to sift and categorize, so that a good game room (much like a casino) actually becomes a blur, colors and sounds blending together into a black hole of time. With bodies colliding and eyes wide, we waltz about the room flitting from game to game, spending our hard earned money in an attempt to squeeze a little more dopamine out of our emaciated glands.

I can’t spot him so I turn my head back to the game. Suddenly, I hear a loud crashing noise and my friend Jon calls out. “Tim!” It’s happening again: Chris is having a seizure. I calmly turn and walk to the spot where the crowd of whip lashed onlookers are gathering. “I’m his brother, it’s okay.” “Someone call an ambulance.” There is always some guy in the crowd who thinks they know better than the rest of us how to handle this situation. I’ve seen it all; one guy even tried to stick a wallet down Chris’ throat. People just seem to react so negatively and I think it’s because their “ordered” world has had a little chaos cast into it. Chris likened his seizures to an acid trip: All the things about the way our minds work are just turned inside sideways. Chaos reigns.

“Don’t call anything. He’ll be all right.” I drone standard speech number seven. I grab a jacket and roll it up into a pillow for his head and just let him go.

I look down at his face. His eyes are closed and the lids are twitching in a sort of syncopated rhythm. I grab his hand in an attempt to soothe him and he lets out a grunt. He looks so peaceful, as if he were having some fantastic dream about running along a pebble ridge that would one day be an autobahn. His hand moves. We are tossing rocks at the kite some kid is flying. I’m kneeling next to him, trying to wish away his troubles; he’s dreaming about running along the beginnings of some German highway.

At this point in his life he had not yet learned to resent his seizures because he had yet to see himself the way that others saw him: weak, deformed, freakish. It wouldn’t take long before he would catch on, though, and I think that this incident probably was one of the most defining factors for him. When I told him about it later (he never retained any memory of his attacks), I made the mistake of
talking about how others gathered around and gawked. How could I know what this would do to him? I saw his face fall when I told him how he had fallen right there at the main entrance to Paradise Lanes. Maybe I should never have told him. Maybe I shouldn’t try to second guess myself.

Epilogue

It has been my particular torment that my memories of Chris are not all that good. I mean “good” in two ways: First, I am losing my memory of his life and so what mostly remains are memories that are associated with very strong emotions; and second, partly as an outcome of losing memory, most of the strong memory that lingers is negative. The reality is that Chris’ obstacles in life loomed larger than for most of us: He was a very sensitive, connected kid in a very negative and separated world. And in the end, he struggled to fit into a society that deemed him a freak for many reasons—the most tangible being his epilepsy. It is his experiences, his struggles, which define my flagging memories. As I suggested earlier in this essay, it is your having read these memories of Chris that will give him life again.