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Realization

There he was, The Chris Man, a model of physical perfection. He had golden blonde hair, blue eyes, and the type of smile you only see on people in magazines. All of this was accompanied by a lean, athletic build and perfectly bronzed skin, no matter what the time of year. One look at him and images of California surfers or Brad Pitt, in the film "Troy", came to mind. But, he wasn't riding any waves or storming any beaches in the name of the gods. At this particular moment he was running down a gravel driveway in Smalltown, Iowa, a baseball bat raised overhead, chasing after two camouflage clad rednecks armed with shotguns. The rednecks were his cousins, who had just finished a day of hunting and had decided it would be a great idea to come pick on The Chris Man and his "queer skateboarder friends" as they put it.

We were minding our own business, skating in The Chris Man's garage when his cousins walked up pointing shotguns at us and threatening to shoot us. We all knew in our minds they wouldn't really do it, but still, having a gun pointed at you is rather intimidating. At least for the rest of us it was, but not for The Chris Man. Almost as soon as they had walked up and began flaunting their weapons, The Chris Man grabbed a weapon of his own. His weapon of choice was an old, dented and rusty Louisville Slugger that had probably been around since his dad was a kid. The Chris Man picked up the bat and charged. Now, I would take a shotgun over a

bat in a fight any day of the week, but his cousins turned and fled in terror. The Chris Man gave chase. After a broken arm and several bruised ribs, his cousins never bothered us again. I had just witnessed the most heroic act of my life. Well, at least up until that point.

Fast forward ten years. I walk in the front door of my house after a long day at work sitting in front of a computer. It was a gorgeous summer day. One of those days where it's nice and warm, but there is just enough breeze so that your body doesn't have to sweat in order to accomplish sitting still. I had been stuck inside all day so I was ready to take full advantage of the rest of the afternoon. I started changing my clothes while simultaneously calling Nick on my cell phone.

"You, umph, up for....some, umph, golf?" I managed to spit out while hopping on one foot trying to take my pants off.

"Well, actually I have some news." Nick replied. I could tell immediately he hadn't won the lottery.

"Lorus found Chris dead this morning."

I can still hear those words echoing in my head to this day. This is strange to me, because at the time I heard them first I don't remember feeling anything. I stood there on the other end of the phone and my mind was blank. No sadness, no anger, no guilt; absolutely nothing. My instincts took over and I replied, "Are you fucking serious?" Which is a legitimate response if you knew the type of friends I have.

“Yeah. I just heard from Dallas. I guess Lorus found him dead in his bed this morning.”

There was no emotion in his voice.

“Alright.” I replied. “I’ll head over to your place in a little bit.”

I hung up the phone and looked down at the screen. I opened the last text message I had received from Chris. He had texted me the previous Friday after I had blown off an afternoon of rock climbing we were supposed to do together.

“I don’t know if you’re busy or if you’re blowing me off but it’s kind of rude. I’ve been detoxing and I could really use a friend right now.” I had heard those words so many times over the past several years.

I can remember when it all started. Chris had always been the life of the party. He was brilliant in almost every sense of the word: intelligent, handsome, athletic and creative. He had a drive to be the best I have never seen in another person to date. Sometime during my senior year, his junior, he began to experiment with drugs mildly. This wasn’t surprising as most of our group had tried weed or prescription pills from time to time throughout our high school careers. But with Chris you could see a transformation almost immediately. By the end of his senior year he was taking Xanax or Percocet on a weekly basis.

The problem only grew when he left home to attend the University of Iowa for college. I wasn’t around during his freshman year so I can’t speak from personal experience. Through my friends I learned that he was getting high on a daily basis. Downers when he went out at night

and uppers to get going the next morning. It was an endless circle that quickly spiraled out of control. Chris was living like the rock star he was. Only, he never got famous.

The night that I received the call we went over to Chris' parent's house. This was probably the most uncomfortable I have been in my entire life. Uneasy doesn't even begin to describe how I felt trying to comfort his mother and sister. The whole time I could only focus on the fact that I didn't even know how I felt. How was I supposed to be compassionate or comforting of someone else's feelings? I stood there sweating under my shirt only vaguely aware of Karen sobbing on my shoulder. It was the sweat you get when your mind and body are fighting over whether or not to run away from your current surroundings.

Lorus told us the story of how he had found Chris. Chris had been living at home after he dropped out of Iowa and it was part of Lorus' daily routine to go downstairs and wake Chris up in the morning. In the past Kyle would always be sleeping at the foot of Chris' bed and would immediately bark at Lorus when he walked into the room. Like every other morning Lorus woke up and went downstairs to wake Chris up for breakfast. That morning Kyle never barked.

It was Christmas of 2006 and I was home on military leave. Like every other year, my group of friends was at the local bar on Christmas Eve tipping back fifteen cent cups of beer. There's nothing like opening presents on Christmas morning with cottonmouth and a pounding headache. I had been at the bar for about an hour when Chris walked in. I could hardly recognize him anymore. He had lost a lot of weight. His face was almost grossly thin and his head was shaved. He was no longer the life of the party. His presence went unnoticed unless

he was making some asshole remark, usually for the sole purpose of pissing someone off. Just the previous night that we had held an intervention for him. It wasn't a formal intervention, I guess. We didn't have a professional present, or even his actual family, but we were family enough. We thought we were anyways.

Chris was outraged at the confrontation. "Who the hell are you to judge me?" "Nick smokes weed!" "Zach, you take pills!" He couldn't, or didn't want to, admit that he had a serious problem. But I guess that's how it is with addicts. They always think they are in control. They always have the power to stop if they want to. I remember crying to him that night. Telling him that he was my friend and that I wanted to help him. He didn't hear any of it.

After we left Chris' parent's house we went back to Nick's and people began to come over to celebrate Chris' memory. I suppose it was the typical night of drinking and reminiscing that most people have after the death of a close friend or family member. People laughed and people cried. I sat in the corner most of the night, quietly trying to decide how I really felt about the news I had heard that day. Honestly, I still didn't feel a whole lot of anything. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and read that text one more time. After a long pause I pressed delete, took a deep breath, and rejoined my group of friends for a beer. I didn't feel anything because nothing had really happened that day. It may have taken the death of Chris to realize it, but The Chris Man had died a long time ago.