

Christopher's Condition

When I discovered that a brain-sized lump had grown onto my liver, I realised that my life had been perfect before that day. The week before I had landed in A&E my mind had previously been occupied with the flowery concept of love in relation to Shakespeare's sonnets; a brutal essay that bit at me hour by hour amid writer's block and my inability to apply myself.

Surprisingly, thoughts about the essay were what primarily resided in my mind as I sat in white-walled A&E, balancing upon a plastic chair which looked as if it had been taken from a school classroom compared to my long clumsy legs.

I recall thinking of how quiet my life would become if I were to be told that the lump was bad. Then I tried to think of it no more, for fear of drowning in the idea. I tried to replace the thought with another, to distract myself: my favourite day. I discovered then that happy thoughts brought me more agony than those which were sad, because they were saturated with nostalgia. A typical student of literature, I wallowed in gloom and contemplated the Problem of Evil while a nurse shouted across the mass of people that were crammed into A&E.

I remember looking across the room at a man with a broken leg and thought about how lucky he was. The white walls glistened.

"Christopher McConnell!"

I stood up so briskly that the chair almost fell over backwards. Then, in the same way that a parent carries a crying child from a playground, my legs carried me to the first of a long line of doctors that I was to see that day.

I cannot relate to you the ordeal that it takes to discover illness. With each hour that I remained in hospital, I assumed that a diagnosis would be delivered to me immediately. When, after a week of tests, news about my condition arrived, I must admit that I felt relieved, even when I discovered that my body had betrayed me.

When you find that a severe error has occurred in your body, your mind plays a trick on itself by making you feel as if you are able to manage it, and perhaps even survive it. Maybe we are programmed this way so that we do not hurl ourselves into oblivion before the world decides that we're ready. Regardless, I remained relatively composed in being told that it was likely I would die sooner than I had thought I would. I remember thinking about the liver and how it had meant nothing to me only a few months before. I had received a plastic model of the human body when I was eight at Christmas, and its liver had been yellow like the sun. Amidst my whirring thoughts, I wondered if livers really were yellow. When I asked, the doctor informed me that they were brown, and refrained from pulling a face.

"I'm sorry... the shock's made me rather delirious I think..." I breathed, and I directed my head to the floor, focusing my eyes on the flecks of black in the tiles that covered it.

"It's entirely normal."

"Sorry, I need to go to the bathroom; I'm really feeling very sick..."

The doctor informed me again that it was entirely normal, and I despised that he kept using that word. He said it as though livers became diseased as frequently as milk was bought.

I distinctly recall wondering why I had ever cried before that day.

It seems, then, that I am enraptured in an unrequited love with life. It had led me on to think that it favoured me and adored me, like a special child. Now it has slapped me and told me to recoil back to the void from which I came. I can think of little else as I lie on my board-like hospital bed. The machines beside me whirr relentlessly, and I think about whether I'll be hooked up to something similar in a few minutes time when they send me to sleep. Familiar dull tension hangs in the atmosphere as I wait in the ward for someone to call my name.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes.” I reply with some irritation in my voice, because I had forgotten that my family are here and the suddenness of my father's voice startles me.

A figure appears in the door and like lightning I stand up and begin telling everyone that I'll see them later before the nurse has a chance to say that the surgeon is ready for me. The nurse smiles at me in a way that suggests that everything will be fine, and it terrifies me because I know that this is not necessarily true.

“Are you nervous?” My brother asks as I walk towards the door, and I want to strangle him.

The nurse makes light conversation with me while we walk through a corridor lit with yellow lamps and decorated with a jungle-coloured mural of plants and animals. I spout a meaningless description of what I'm studying at university, which I find embarrassing because it is evident that I don't care about what I'm saying and neither does she. Yet, in these circumstances, I take the opportunity to indulge myself in the pretence that things like essays still matter in my life, and somehow it relieves my anguish that in less than an hour I will be unconscious and cut open. We turn the corner. A claustrophobic forest of drip machines and thick air comes into view. The sight of it makes me aware that I am too young to do this.

The room smells pungent of disinfectant. Before I have time to survey it, I am told to get on to the bed. Of all the things that it feels like as I put my hand on it, it doesn't feel like a bed.

I lie on it and think about the babies I might not have. I also think about the career that I was supposed to get, but Christopher McConnell, the sparkling journalist who was once so brightly vivid in my imagination, is a blur of a person now. I think about how I love everyone and don't want to go. My sinuses prickle. In an attempt to salvage my eyes from tears I babble mindlessly to the anaesthetist and grin widely as they slide the needle into the back of my hand. The anaesthetist tells me that I have good veins and I laugh hysterically. Amongst my meaningless slurs I ask if I should count to ten.

“You don't have to do that.”

“I really want to.” I say, laughing loudly again. They do it in films, and I want to cling to something familiar.

The anaesthetist tells me that I can, confirming that I'm not insane, and then says, “OK, Christopher, it's time to lie back now.”

I panic internally, my heart like a hare's. My body betrays me by leaning back anyway.

“When should I start counting? Should I start counting now?” I ask wildly, my eyes screwed shut, experiencing something of stage fright.

“You can start counting now.”

Relieved that I'd finally been given a definite command, I open my eyes and see a mural of birds on the ceiling above me.

1...

The birds are arranged in a circle, perching in a brilliant array of colour, like a wreath of rainbow feathers. I watch them as the anaesthetist puts me to sleep. They float above my head, spiralling.

2...

I remain as awake as I was before. To stop my consciousness from frightening me, I study the birds furiously. The colours remind me of a book of fairy tales that reside in my grandmother's spare room, in which the pictures had been painted with watercolour. In it there is a picture of Aladdin sitting on a mound of treasure with a peacock perched beside him.

3...

I give the birds on the ceiling a smile. The pages of the books in my grandmother's house had been as dry as chalk; even thinking about the texture of them sent chills down my spine, so that my hand jerked fractionally and I really felt the needle in the back of my hand.

4...

The mural is fading and I fall into unconsciousness, which is a sensation hardly worth describing, because it is like nothing I have ever known. Yet somehow it is comforting, almost like being sung to sleep.

I'm in a church. I can tell that I am because it's freezing, and the air smells like old books. Perhaps it's Christmas, but because my family only goes to church on Christmas day I can't tell. Light streams through the windows which are filled with stained glass, illuminating the dust that floats around the still atmosphere in bright colours. Momentarily I wonder if I've died during the operation. The thought is forgotten and with my eyes narrowed, I examine the jewel-toned glass shapes in the windows. At the top of one of them, there's a dove hovering in the sky, and angels and kings and knights beneath it. At the bottom there are shepherds with no shoes on. I imagine a row of people dying from disease below them. I cannot help thinking of Jesus telling everybody that God made us all equal.

I awake in a hospital bed, Leticia and Sam peering over me like geese. The sky is bright, snow-bright, and I feel appreciative of being alive. I'm joyous that it's over, even though I am aware that the ordeal has barely begun. Through the fogginess of my headspace I hear the nurse telling me that I have access to more drugs if I need them. Without hesitation I squeeze the pump beside my bed and feel the morphine run through my veins like ice. My head feels like a lead balloon. It wants to rise up into the sky and float, but it's tied to my body which is weighed down like a log. I lie on my back and grin.

The drugs make me nauseous and cloud my brain but I love them because they are doing a far better job of consoling me than the nurses are; they take tumour tests, and then perform an extra one without telling me why; they never speak a word to me. I sit here, propped by pillows in the same way that an infant is propped before it learns to walk. The morphine makes my head soft. I attempt to gather my thoughts into an order that I can understand.

Life is like heaven, the way it dips and slips around. Who made it? Not God, because God wouldn't make so many people ill. There would be no hospitals if there was a God. Unless he's a cruel person. Or perhaps God is just an ordinary man who royally messed up when he made me, so that my body glitched at the age of 20. But he still has time to save me. Maybe I won't die.

I imagine God laughing. "You think I'm going to save you? I gave you life, damn it. You were lucky to get that!" I agree with him in my head, because he has a good point.

Life is like heaven, and perhaps I should just appreciate the possibility of God being there, and think of him as someone who created something beautiful but who now watches the earth through his fingers, wishing that he'd made us all just a little bit better made rather than just churning us all out...

Nothing articulate carries to my mind. The morphine shortens my attention span to that of an animal, and quickly my mind drifts to a nurse giving an old man some soup in the bed beside me, and then to the shapes littered over my bed robe.

"You look like you're insane." Sam says from across the ward, and I ignore him.

Had Sam not been my brother, I am convinced that we would have despised each other. We clash in everything. But even so, there are, on rare occasions, fragmentary moments of loyalty between us, as if we are intrinsically linked by brotherhood in a way that not all brothers are, and so we love each other despite everything we disagree upon.

I love Leticia too, in a distant way. I find it so hard to make a connection with her when she's about to buy a house.

The days drag on relentlessly, like a horse pulling a cart in slow motion, and they melt into nights before I can even notice. I begin to realise what it must be like for the very, very old, because calendar dates are no longer relevant to my life at all. I also find myself saying thank you numerous times, despite the situation being so intrinsically frightening. I thank doctors and nurses and my family for making me a cup of tea. I also smile more. I am certain that the majority of people in the ward are convinced I am being fed a constant stream of positive news. The truth is that if I do not smile, I will spiral into feeling nothing at all and crumble. As well as this, every good feeling, regardless of how small it is, becomes magnified, as if it has never been felt before. Cups of tea become Christmas presents; magazines become the highlight of your day. I never thought cancer would have that sort of power over me.

I stunt the thought of cancer before it can grow. I wonder briefly if I would continue to suppress the idea of it if the doctor told me that that was what I still had after the operation. Then I cut the thought at the root again.

My dad sits beside my bed, and I feel him attempting to ignore the way my eyes dart about the room while I try to deny what is happening.

"Chris, have you spoken to one of the nurses about the follow-up?" My dad asks, averting his eyes from his magazine, and apparently denial is something that I've inherited, as 'Chris' is an identity formulated from dad's imagination. 'Chris' is a well-known entity in several societies at university, plays for the football team on Wednesday nights and goes out on Fridays, and he embodies everything that dad would love me to be, and nothing of what I'm really like.

I nod. Regrettably I don't know if I have spoken to a nurse or not, but that can wait until another day when deliberate thought doesn't make me feel sick.

"You mentioned to one of the team about all of this?"

"No, I'll do it in a while." I say, because it is easier than telling him for the umpteenth time that I dropped out of the team two months ago. Even if I had wanted to argue with him, each syllable I say drains me. Sleep drowns me again.

I awake at 3:08 a.m. to the piercing light of the digital alarm clock's bright red numbers and the sound of somebody being sick in the cubicle next to mine. I hear the slaps of a nurse's shoe soles followed by her quiet murmur. An old man's voice bellows something inaudible in response and I feel the man in the other cubicle beside me wake up, even though we have a curtain drawn between us. A familiar feeling of impatience rises inside me to hurry back to sleep so that I am not exhausted in the morning, before I remember that there is nothing for me to be awake for tomorrow.

Hours of dipping in and out of sleep pass from then on. Nurses come to wake me up and take my blood, to which I give them thanks and fall into my shallow sleep again. In the afternoon, my cousin Abigail arrives with a bunch of magenta chrysanthemums and a stack of magazines to keep us occupied. She sits beside my bed and chats about the traffic and the types of customers she gets at the hair salon. Listening to her talk about the normality of her life soothes me so much that I keep prompting her to say something else. After we've each chosen a magazine from the pile we sit in silence for a while, and I contain my desire to keep asking her questions until I can stand it no longer.

"What are you reading?"

"Oh, it's just lots of silly bits about fashion."

"I'm interested."

Her voice is how the wood of a chair feels; basic but sturdy, and I listen to her talk about the makeup that her magazine recommends for the Winter season and bask in it.

Two days come and go before I am told that I'm allowed to stand up. With the instruction of three nurses, I drop my legs over the edge of the bed and experience standing for the first time in a week and a half. My legs look like twigs beneath my body and tremble under the weight of me. Dad supports and pulls at my arm and I refrain from pushing him away because a stabbing pain jabs at my side where the scar is. There's something ghastly about that tug in my side. It's a sharp reminder that I've no real control over my own body. I tell dad it hurts and he lets go.

"You need to go for a walk," The nurse says, "to get used to it, OK?"

I nod and attempt to take a slow step, but it hurts to take my leg off the ground so I drag it instead. The nurse puts her hand around my arm and says, "Someone will go with you. Who will it be?"

We decide on Sam, and it takes us five minutes to walk to the corridor outside the ward. An ill-situated wall mirror is mounted along the length of the corridor when we get there, and as I shuffle across the glossy hospital floor with my hand gripped tightly around my brother's arm, I catch a glimpse of myself in it. My grandfather walks beside me in the reflection, hunch-backed with plum-coloured shadows under his eyes.

"What's up?" Sam asks.

“No, I’m good, I’m fine; I just saw my reflection.”

A strange positivity washes over me. Perhaps it’s the morphine, but mixed with it is a surprising relief that I am coping with the surgery and the blood tests and the thought of cancer better than I imagined I would.

“Where’s Leticia?” I ask.

“She’s on the phone to the estate agent, I think.”

“Or Mark.” I say.

“Well, you know Leticia.”

Sam averts his eyes towards mine so that we share a silent joke which has carried on between us over the expanse of two years, and I let out a laugh that’s worth the momentary sharp tug at my side that it induces.

Another day dissolves before my eyes, and while walking provides me with more freedom to explore the hospital, it does not allow me to escape it. I have mastered sitting down and standing, as well as propping myself up, which means that when I carefully position myself against the windowsill beside my bed, I can see people walking to work in the morning. A network of spider webs has also formed outside the bedside window, providing me with the most disgusting display of Darwinism I’ve seen in a long while. Hundreds of midges hang in its silver venom, and the spider that’s ensnared them sits above them all and waits. They’re the unlucky ones. I look at Abigail’s chrysanthemums to take my mind off it.

I awake in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. Something is bothering me and I can’t tell what it is. Looking at the clock doesn’t remedy this, as it is only 3 a.m., and there are still four hours more until the nurses start waking us up for our blood tests. I stare numbly at the ceiling and wish to go back to sleep, but my head is buzzing with thoughts that I don’t want. I imagine myself joining a river of ghosts which flows and flows until it is eventually poured off the edge of the earth and into space, carrying me with it. It chills me to the core to think of each of those ghosts having a whole life attached to it, and then disappearing as quickly as a thought leaves someone’s head. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand up instinctively, and it feels as if my body is trying to save me from delving deeper into those terrible thoughts. I think about going to the toilet to distract myself, but then I remember the window at the other end of the ward and start shuffling towards it without a second thought. The window overlooks the city, and when I finally get to it I discover that the sky is as black as velvet and dappled with white stars, small like pinholes. I hadn’t realised that seeing stars was possible with a city blaring beneath them. My eyes hang wider. I make a wish that requires not only time to be reversed but also for God to choose a different person to have what I have. Then guilt washes over me and I retract the wish. Nobody tells you of the guilt that you consistently feel in a hospital, where somebody always has it worse than you have. I want to slap myself, because the doctors think that it’s only Stage 2, and it might’ve been Stage 3 or 4, and I am lucky because I’m in a good hospital, and I’m lucky because people love me, and I’m lucky because even if I die tomorrow, I have had a good life.

I do not mind dying, because never waking up is something that I will never have to come to terms with, and dying is something that I will never have to live with.

I feel my robe float around my legs; a crisp, thin shower curtain about my knees. I feel naked, which I must confess that I like. I shuffle out into the corridor again and look back at the stars. Perhaps God didn't create a perfect world but he certainly did something right. The bright colours of the mural on the wall are dim but distinct enough for me to see jungle creatures swooping and galloping along it. I lean my back against one of the tigers and kick my slippers off. The socks I had been given squeeze my legs, which is what they're supposed to do, but when I sit down they press into my calves like Sam's fingernails used to do when he was four and I was nine. Gingerly I pull the elasticised rim away from my leg to see how deep the indentations are in my skin. Brown-pink marks crown my calves. I wonder for a moment what it might be like to have bare legs again. Carefully I drag the sock down, feeling the tightness of it intensify and then relax as it is pulled down past the thickest part of my calf. My skin is soaked with perspiration and its red: the skin of new-borns. I would do almost anything to feel real air on it. Instead, I flap at it with my hands frantically, and yank the other sock down so that both are exposed to the sensation of coolness again. I tilt my head against the chilled wall and feel the glossy smoothness of the paint touch a fraction of my scalp.

The holes in the socks under the soles of my feet feel cold suddenly, so lift them off the ground. I glance at my feet, propped on their heels to keep the gaps in the socks from resting on the cold floor, and have a laugh at myself for being so scared of something that I would eventually have to face: the fact that some things in life just have to be dealt with, whether they're understood or not.

I put my feet back on the cold floor, and inhale deeply.

I am breathing air. I am happy, in this moment. In this very moment, I love the world and the world loves me. I am fragile and might disappear in the next half-breath, just as the world might. I am familiar with both unbounded joy and crippling sadness.

I am here, and breathing air.

I am here, and I breathe and breathe and breathe.