Chris

Chris Potter. A man of many parts. We'd known this all along, of course, but at his memorial service on April 26, it hit me like a ton of bricks how many things he'd done, he'd accomplished, and he was, in his life. Student. Avid reader. Farmer. Filmmaker. Television producer. Small businessman. Gardener. Garden Center designer and manager. Fly fisherman. Expert woodworker.

His was a life of many, many projects; some simultaneous, some consecutive, but all involving a level of planning, preparation, execution, and excellence that is not only a marvel to me, but completely foreign to me. Mine has been a life of processes, not projects. But Chris? He didn't really have what you'd call a career, but rather a long series of disparate projects, each successful, some spectacularly so. And these weren't casual projects, or hobbies, but each an expression of some deep passion for living, learning, building, doing, completing. When you look back on it, you wonder if this guy every took time to relax. But of course, not only was he able to relax, relaxing well was one of his greatest skills: a drink, some cheese and crackers, some good company—that's when he was at his best. Hilarious. Charming. Goofy. Deeply engaged.

His was also a life of many, many relationships. My God, the man knew how to relate to people. All his relationships were fueled by the same charm, curiosity, friendliness, and amazing energy. But each was unique, particular, specific. There's nothing in the world like discovering or realizing that someone's actually interested in you, so that each time you see them, no matter how much time has passed, you feel like you're picking up where you left off, with someone who cares about you. That's what it was like with him. As I told Lynn, one morning after he died I found myself in a sort of rage, thinking Jesus, why have you left me? There was so much more we haven't yet talked about.

His transcendent relationship, of course, was with Lynn. I always had the feeling that every day of his life for the past nearly forty years he thought about how lucky he was to have found her, and they to have found each other. I don't think he took much for granted, which is a great way to be. And he certainly didn't take Lynn for granted, ever. That's the mark of a great marriage.

He was also a man of many names. His sister addressed him as "brother," and his nephew as "uncle." And he called Rob "nephew." Seems sort of Dickensian (and, by the way, he hated Dickens. His only fault). And while the Hexham crowd, and his old friends in England and Scotland, know him as Chris, in America he was generally known only as Potter—especially by the many little kids who crossed his path over the years. I have a number of friends who became close to him who've asked me at various times "Hey, does Potter have a first name? Or is that his first name?"

In a smaller group, he was known as Y.P. At the Pocono house, he and I were often the first up in the morning. I'd come into the kitchen to find him sitting and writing in his diary, or listening to the BBC on a special radio he brought with him, and he'd greet me by saying, in a theatrical voice, "Well, Dr. Ritchie," to which I'd respond "Good morning, Young Potter." Then we'd shut up and eat our breakfasts in silence, until we were ready to start talking. Young Potter turned into Y.P., and became a serious enough handle that he's used it for years as his email address: Y.P@which.net. I can think of three or four people who know him only as Y.P. At one point, many years ago, when he was amusing himself by trying to claim a share in the house built long ago by our grandparents, Daniel and Rachel McGee, he said he had discovered paperwork proving that he occupied an obscure branch in the family tree, and started referring to himself as the McGee Bastard. Another name.

Lynn, Gill, and Kath organized two services for him last week, on April 25th and 26th. The first was at the Mountsett Crematorium, for a small group, the second at a place called Vallum, for a larger group.

We—the Ritchie family that is—were a little apprehensive about the crematorium service, because we are completely unaccustomed to such things, and tend to get a little nervous around churches, rituals, and symbols. When our parents, our brother, our close friends have died and been cremated, the whole process has taken place backstage. As Chris would say, you ask for a cremation, and two days later you get an urn. Bob's your uncle. No theatrics.

But in England, I guess, things are done differently, and this was to be an actual service. On the proscenium, not behind the scenes. It was up to Lynn et al to structure the event however they wanted—that is, they didn't have to enlist the services of a stranger to speak, or invoke a God to be present. But there was to be a casket, pallbearers, flowers, and a curtain that would close at the end.

As I understand it, one of the reasons that Gill, Kath, and Lynn went ahead and scheduled a ceremony that they had some misgivings about was because the funeral director with whom they hwere working, Kevin, seemed to be such a nice, kind, and caring man that they were inclined to follow his suggestions. They had an awful lot to be thinking about in the days following Chris's death. In fact, he is a nice, kind, and caring man, and following his lead turned out to be exactly the right thing to do. I never thought I'd say this about a funeral director, but from what Lynn, Gill, and Kath told me, Kevin was a source of real comfort and strength in a tough time.

The service took place at the Mountsett Crematorium, located in County Durham, on the "outskirts of Dipton, with outstanding views of the valley." We were picked up at the house in Hexham by a black limousine, into which piled Lynn, Jenny, Gill, Kath, Rob, Bill, and

me, and we proceeded down the hill to the Co-op Funeral Home, where Chris had spent the last two weeks. When we arrived, seeing the coffin sitting in the back of the small, sleek-looking hearse, made us, or some of us, catch our breath. It seemed extremely final. Until then, to me anyway, his death was in a way only a concept, though a heartbreaking one.

But it wasn't really final, just the beginning of the journey to Dipton, which was a gorgeous drive on a breezy, partly sunny, partly windy early spring day. Two black cars, in line, making their way somberly between the hedgerows and past the farms, on winding country roads. It had been a late spring in Northumberland, and the greens were just arriving, in more shades than you can shake a stick at. We passed farms and fields, ancient English oaks, jigsaw patterned stone walls, flocks of sheep, little lambs hopping around in pastures. Let me take a moment to mention how spectacular the English landscape is. Somebody should make a movie about it. And on this day, and on this occasion, it was particularly gorgeous.

It was about a forty five minute drive, and when we arrived at Mountsett we could see, standing on the sidewalk, a little group of Lynn's and Chris's old, dear friends: Nick and Ingeborg, Charlie and Elspeth, Steve and Sarah and their boys, Aidan and Adam, Mike and Trish, Ian Scott, cousin Joan and David.

Kevin marshaled his troops, and six pall bearers carried the casket into the small chapel. After a few minutes, we followed, passing the very same pall bearers who were now standing at attention as we entered. It occurred to me that these people have a very strange job, which mainly involves respectfully carrying and putting caskets in the right place, then looking extremely somber and sad about the passing of complete strangers. But I must say, they did their job well, and I thought it was an important one. On one level, they're just stage props. On another, though, they are representations of the larger

world, mourning the end of an important life. It seemed perfectly appropriate to have them there.

When we got to our seats, or pews, the casket had been placed on a sort of brass track in the front left corner. Kevin had explained that when the short service was finished, the semicircular curtain would close, we could reflect on Chris for a few moments, then we'd file out. Another service was to follow ours, so there was no lingering.

Lynn had told me at one point she was dreading this event, but in the end we all found it lovely and fitting. Chris's nephew, Rob Pettit, delivered a wonderful eulogy to his uncle, focused on their work together on Rob's narrow boat, or canal boat, in London, and Chris's extraordinary skills as a craftsman, mentor, spiritual guide, and beloved uncle. The building of the boat, and the relationship between uncle and nephew, was weaved into a set of perfect metaphors about Chris's life, and his impact on all of us. When Rob finished, he turned behind him and walked to Chris's casket, giving it (for all of us) a farewell pat. Then he returned to his seat, the curtain slowly closed, and we all thought about the person who wasn't there.

There were two exits in the front of the small room. The left one was where the casket was to be slid out once the curtain closed. The other, on the right, was the one that we all filed slowly out of. I remember thinking as I passed through the door that the Mountsett administration might think about replacing the FIRE EXIT sign with a simple EXIT sign. Chris, I believe, would have found this suggestion extremely amusing, which is the only reason I mention it here. When we were gathered together outside, I can tell you there were a lot of tears from some big, strong men and women. Not a lot of stiff, British upper lips.

Thursday's gathering, the next day, was meant to follow the pattern of memorials that we in our family have become all too familiar with

and practiced at: close friends and relatives together in an informal setting, where people can say whatever they'd like about the person being remembered. Some people prepare remarks, or read a poem or passage, some speak spontaneously.

The setting was marvelous. Kath's old school chum Vicki manages a weddings and events venue called Vallum, on a farm in the "Hadrian's Wall Country" eight miles west of Newcastle. It was great to see Vicki again. She is, as our Northern Irish great aunt would say, quite an article: funny, vivacious, merry—and talented She also runs a great outfit, which was perfect for our purposes.

Lynn had asked me to be the greeter and master of ceremonies, which I was flattered to do—though I was a little apprehensive about whether this crowd of Brits would pick up on the concept we were so accustomed to. They did, instantly, and we proceeded to have a Chris Potter Fest, filled with funny stories, moving stories, sweet memories, and tributes, that covered his whole life. I won't try to summarize or recount these here. You had to be there. There were a lot of tears, a lot of laughs, and—when we were done—a lot of food.

God, what a great guy. Everyone loved him. This, of course, is an oft-said remark at any memorial service, but you'll agree that in Chris's case, it is absolutely and actually true. What a rare thing. Strangely, and wonderfully, the only other person I've ever known about whom the same can be said is Lynn. Everyone loves her too. What a pair.