

Tim

The fact that I met Tim in a second hand bookstore is probably symbolic of our friendship somehow. I was working at a bookstore at Wrightwood and Clark, and he was a law student living in a tiny apartment near Fullerton and Clark. I've tried to remember that first meeting, but it is lost in a fog of making conversation with him over the years with shelves of books seemingly always as a backdrop, either in a bookshop or in my apartment or his. Of course, music was also a component in our friendship too - Tim masking as well he could how appalled he must have been at my musical illiteracy with regard to classical music, and pulling vinyl recording after recording off a shelf to play for me a movement of this or that performance to illustrate something he had been saying. Often I would both listen and sit and watch as he began conducting the music, almost involuntarily, with his eyes closed and a look of deep satisfaction on his face. And he was frequently loaning me records to make tapes of - I still have some at home he didn't want back after CDs became the new medium. Music impacted him emotionally and intellectually at the same time, the way it ideally should, and only sometimes did for me. I envied his better taste and better mind. On the other hand, we could talk jazz on a fairly equal basis, and at least there I wouldn't seem like a complete mope.

Talking and books and music - I think it was Tim who back then started me reading the Times Literary Supplement on a regular basis - he always seemed to be in the middle of the latest issue, and prompted me to become more interested in European history, among many things. My friendship with him had that effect on me, to provoke me out of the mental sloth I'm all too prone to, to have his enthusiasm for things and curiosity about things rub off on me. Just listening to him led me to realize that

my college education had left me still utterly ignorant in many important areas. And, he was funny in a unique and understated way. I suppose that's how we initially hit it off. Thinking back on those early days, when I first met him, I guess it must have been a period of time when he was coming into his local used book store, taking a break from studying to experience a species of low-budget entertainment if ever there was one, and, since each of us were a bit reserved, it must have been our senses of humor striking a chord that initiated the friendship.

Then, a few years later, I was working at the U of C bookstore, about the time Julia entered the picture - she was doing PR for the blood bank at the U of C Hospital across the street from the bookstore - and we all became friends. [and oh, she used to persecute me and terrorize me, trying to get me to give blood, but I digress] And then later, I had my own bookstore. So, it was always books with me and Tim. And music.

Julia and I became good friends too, which isn't the typical case when you have two male friends and one gets married. They become a couple, but the unstated truth tends to be that the two guys are friends and the wife is included as much as she wants to be - something like that. But, Julia and I became real friends too, on our own terms. And, there's this thing where any friendship brings to the surface a particular version of your personality and sense of humor. Or, to put it more elegantly, if I may quote Guy Davenport, "Personality, unlike character, is fractal." So, anyway, I found myself in the position of having these two, not at all incompatible, but not exactly the same either, versions of myself running in parallel, as it were, when I would see them together as a couple. Tim and I would be sardonic and witty and Julia and I would be not so much literary as a bit more openly comedic and silly. Julia always found me naturally funny, which was not the typical reaction, believe me. So, she caused me to stretch in that direction I was around them. It all added up to fun, in any case. I recall one time we went to a Russian restaurant/nightclub for

Tim's birthday. Julia had talked the singer/MC to sing happy birthday to Tim, and his heavy Russian accented version of the song, singing to Teeem Feeeshaar had us all collapsed in laughter.

On the other hand, Tim and I were big fans of Monty Python, which Julia didn't really appreciate as much. She did like the line where one of the criminal Piranha brothers had nailed Eric Idle's head to the floor, and he fawningly excuses the violence by offering that he probably deserved it, and that which ever one of the Piranha brothers did it, well, *he was a cruel man, but fair*. That was the line that we attached to Tim, because of his sardonic sense of humor and because it wasn't true, at least the cruel part..

I mentioned Guy Davenport a minute ago. He's one of the writers I would have liked to have brought to Tim's attention, or, more likely, learn that Tim knew about him years ago and had most of his books. Patrick Leigh Fermor is another. Patrick O'Brian. Hugh Kenner. And, on a much smaller order of magnitude, my own novel that I wrote a year ago or so. It would have been so interesting to hear what he would have to say about them. But, time ran out on the clock.

And, before I finish, I should mention Jonathan at some point - anyone remember Jonathan? Julia, back in those days, had this little, elderly, bad tempered ankle-biting dog named Jonathan whom she adored. I knew that when Tim passed the Jonathan test that the two of them would succeed as a couple. Because Tim, you see, didn't just tolerate this animal, which could just as easily have been viewed with, shall we say, unsympathetic eyes. He quickly became both genuinely fond of Jonathan and amused by his dyspeptic personality. I was always more cautious around this small fluffy terrorist - trying to make friends, but held back by a certain amount of raw fear.

So, that's how I remember things back then when we got together - Julia and I maybe making cracks about the U of C or

politics, or maybe she'd try to steer the conversation into the latest plot developments in *All My Children* all the while Jonathan was eyeing me darkly, trying to decide whether or not to charge and sink his teeth in my foot. Meanwhile, Tim might add a comment or two, but might not be all that interested in those topics. And, before long the things would circle around to Mahler or Gore Vidal or Napoleon's destruction of the Holy Roman Empire or the strange ferment of people and ideas in Vienna from the 1880s through the first war. Something 'tasty,' as we used to say. Those were the days, my friends...

But, books are books and life is life. And the world can be sharp as a knife, as the saying goes.

How many of us can say we are the heroes of our own story? Tim certainly could say that, though he wouldn't have. The stoicism and adaptability and sheer courage he showed, year after year, until the thing finally wore him down was what caused people to start thinking of him in those terms. And the thing did finally wear him down. What I call 'the thing' was the intertwining disasters of the disease and the the medical treatments. Let's not dwell on that. But, a hero - that means, what? It has this *effect* - not to make you want to be another person and live their life, but that they make you really want to become a better version of yourself. Braver. Better. To be one who can maintain a sense of humor in the face of the unthinkable. To be one who can struggle to continue living while yet being uncowed by death. Philosophers have talked about these qualities for long enough to make them all seem not real. Post Modern irony scoffs as well. But, they are real, as Tim showed us. We could talk about Julia here too, in this context, but I know she'd rather have me stick to the subject.

We did have some fun, too - before his last operation laid him low. Tim was always good at playing pool - pocket billiards. He had a silky smooth stroke that he still retained even though his left hand seemed to have trouble forming the proper bridge

sometimes. He'd shoot over his knuckles or fudge it one way or another and usually beat me anyway. One time he took me to a pool hall in Oak Park somewhere near the mall - it was walking distance from their apartment and I vaguely remember we were talking about some aspect of Homer's Iliad. Then we got to this place, and wow - the place was jammed with rather tough looking people and the tables were worn and battered. I remember thinking that I've got to take Tim to Chris' Billiards over on Milwaukee - one of the quality pool halls in the city, where the serious players go. Quiet place. Beautifully maintained tables. And we did go there a couple times too. I remember one time we were setting out and were both wearing berets. Tim wore one to cover the rather alarming looking dent in his skull that various operations had gifted him with, and I had one too. I think I said something like "what's wrong with two guys, wearing berets and looking kind of gay, going to a pool hall?" Julia had us stand side by side so she could admire our dashing looks.

One of those times we stopped off for a bit to eat at a little Polish diner near Montrose that advertised home cooking and they weren't kidding. Homemade soups and bread - everything was a real treat. It was a sort of minor miracle to find a place like that, which to the casual eye would have looked from the outside like a typical burger and fries, fried chicken from the freezer to the fry-station kind of place. The woman who ran it seemed to radiate warmth and welcome too. We said to ourselves that we've got to go back here next time. But, that was the last excursion to Chris' that we made.

Tim was a bit of kibitzer when we were playing - advising me what shot I should take, telling me if I had the butt of my cue elevated too much, things like that. I've played with some people who, if they did that, it was for the purpose of rattling their opponent. That wasn't Tim, though - he was trying to be helpful. And his suggestions were always exactly right. I think part of it too was sheer exuberance at being out like in the old

days, doing something fun. That, and his natural generosity, plus his instinctive enthusiasm for the game. I wish now, of course, I had done more with him when it was possible. Nobody knows how things will turn out.

These last few years, since the operation on the second brain tumor that left him bedridden, I've experienced Tim's sense of humor mostly second hand through Julia, because he was too exhausted to want to socialize the times I would visit. It was hard to get him even to open his eyes. But, she was telling me that, not that long ago, one day she was doing things around the house and singing. Singing, you know, to keep her spirits up and to amuse Tim and just because she felt like it at the moment. And, let's keep in mind that Julia is, mmmm, no trained singer, and let's also keep in mind Tim's love of music. After a while, he lifted up one eyelid and said laconically "Boo, you've got guts..." Vintage Tim, is what that is.

So, I stand here before you to say that, at least in some small way, I'm a better person for having known Tim Fisher. It was a privilege *to* know him. And it sure was fun while it lasted.