

Big Chris

Michael Royce

In the summer of 1950, my brother Chris was seven and I was not quite four when our family moved into a row of townhouses on Ogden Avenue in Milwaukee. During the four and a half years we lived there, time had not yet started to flow, and all experience danced fresh and unexplored before us. As we marched up and down in this kingdom of our childhood, we challenged and tested life, unaware of times to come when life would test us.

We were obsessed by the jungle gym towering above us in the large common backyard behind the houses of Ogden Row. After jumping from ever-higher points, Chris conceived a brilliant idea. We ran into the house, hauled out two umbrellas, and climbed to the top.

“I can fly,” Chris crowed and without hesitation, jumped into space. Briefly held aloft, he floated against the brightness of the sky until the umbrella collapsed. He plunged to earth and I heard him moan.

I swallowed the dryness in my throat and peered down. Faith in his vision of a slow descent, swaying under the magic canopy of our umbrellas, drained from me. Although my feet did not want to move, it never occurred to me not to follow him. In the end and without hope, I closed my eyes and threw myself over the edge. I paused at the apex of my flight before my umbrella also failed, and I plummeted. Lying next to Chris in a daze, I wondered if anything was broken.

"You hurt, Mikey?" Chris helped me up.

My limbs still moved. "No, I'm okay."

"That should've worked," Chris said.

I nodded. "Maybe something was wrong with the umbrellas."

We limped home. Amazingly, we had broken no bones. Mom applied iodine to our various scrapes and cuts, clucking at our foolishness.

That evening at bedtime, we trudged upstairs to our room with its low rafters. After brushing our teeth, we shouted good night over the banister, turned off the overhead light, and climbed into twin beds tucked inside an alcove with only enough space between them for a small nightstand where our Philco tube radio rested. Turning the radio low so no noise trickled downstairs to alert our parents, we curved toward the sound and snuggled beneath the sheets with our flashlights. Secure in the ghostly glow of our boy caves, we listened to our favorite program.

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?" the narrator intoned. We didn't understand this question in any real sense. In our innocence, we had not yet learned of the sorrows that snapped at the heels of the grown-ups around us. Death and suffering were abstractions, snakes in the cosmos that would worm into our consciousness only later. Still, we shivered at the answer—"The Shadow knows"—and the accompanying ominous laugh. Soothed by the steady breathing of my brother, I wasn't frightened by the villains intent on harming The Shadow.

"Chris, you awake?" I asked with a yawn.

"Yes. Don't worry. The Shadow will outfox them," he said.

As I drifted into the comforting world of dreams, Chris marched ahead of me toward a bright light, and I rushed to catch up.



We all knew each other on The Row. Children poured indiscriminately in and out of ten townhouses, which shared common sidewalls and appeared to be one long building. The houses stood two and a half stories with small enclosed gardens in back, opening onto an alley that

stretched the whole length of The Row and curved around the houses on either end to connect with Ogden Avenue. Across the alley, a common backyard, the pulsing hub of The Row, stretched from east to west with a baseball diamond, spreading elm tree, jungle gym, teeter totter, and swings.

Sam Smith, his younger brother Johnny, and Chris and I envisioned ourselves the center of all action and life on The Row. Smaller and younger than the other three, I was allotted a special place in our gang, like a mascot. Adults, including our parents, existed merely as backdrop for the adventures we experienced together. They seemed not to know what we were doing or why we were doing it. And we did not understand their daily worries and activities, which we heard in sanitized snatches across the dining table.

Sam's real name was Don Smith, after his father, but he had created an imaginary character, a radio announcer called Sammy Valparaiso, whom he constantly wove into his stories. Eventually, he borrowed the name and shortened it to Sammy Val. I was happy to shed Mikey when Sam tagged me "Beechie" because of my passion for Beechnut chewing gum. Johnny, for obscure reasons, was always just Johnny. But for as long as I can remember, my brother was Big Chris. There may have been various reasons others called him Big Chris, but for me there was a simple explanation. I was bound to Chris as to a magnet drawing me into a life more daring than I would have conceived alone.

When I turned five, Johnny was seven, Chris eight years and three months, and Sam well into his tenth year. The frontier of our wandering expanded beyond the backyard to include Juneau Park. We would race one long block down Ogden Avenue, past the local bar called Johnny's Eye Opener, to Sanders Drug Store at the corner of Ogden and Farwell, down Franklin to Prospect, and across Lincoln Memorial Drive to the park. We preferred this route because it avoided the haunted house on Aster Street, which winked at us in ominous emptiness.

At the park, we searched for other boys to fill out two teams for football. In one game, I remained the only obstacle to a tall redhead from the other team charging toward their end zone. I threw myself at his legs and bounced downfield, wrapped around his right foot. Although the drag of my body didn't bring him down, it slowed him. Pounding to the rescue from the right,

Big Chris and Sammy Val tackled him. When the scrum of tangled boys fell apart, Chris picked me up and dusted me off. "You okay?" His right hand tousled my hair.

"Yeah," I said, still shaking from the effort of hanging onto the runner.

Sammy Val waved his arms up and down and yelled, "Way to go, Beechie."

On other days, we just scuffed around the backyard of The Row looking for things to do. One day, without great conviction, we were throwing rocks at a fence post. Sam, Johnny, and Chris hocked globules of glistening phlegm, which seemed to sail forever. Unable to spit, I shuffled away to another part of the yard, deep in thought.

I'd stepped through one of those doors where your surroundings disappear and you're aware only of yourself. Concentrating on what I needed to master, I forgot the rest of the gang. I generated a generous mouthful of saliva, but when I tried to spit, achieved only a large strand of drool. I leaned forward to avoid the swinging spittle, but time and wind worked against me. The lengthening blob drifted back to create a trail of slime up and down my polo shirt.

As I tried to wipe the mess onto my pants, I glanced back at Big Chris and saw him eying me. I flushed and turned to finish my cleaning before I dragged back to the others, certain of merciless teasing. They were busy examining grubs exposed after they'd flipped a big rock. No one said anything, as if they hadn't noticed my absence or dismal attempt to spit. I nudged a centipede with my foot and looked up at Chris. He winked at me.



In the fall of 1952, I entered first grade at Campus Elementary School, where Chris was in the fourth grade. Each day, we rode a streetcar powered by overhead electric lines to within a few blocks of school. In science that year, Chris developed a keen interest in identifying birds, and his enthusiasm soon fired up the rest of us. Some weekends, he would be up and out of the house at dawn to search for new birds with Sammy Val.

I always begged to be included in these expeditions the night before, but in the wan light of early morning, the excitement of birding seemed less glamorous. "It's too early," I'd say and rolled over to burrow deeper into the comfort of my covers.

One spring morning, however, I catapulted out of bed to join them. Not much was happening in the avian world at Juneau Park, so we wandered further to the lagoon. A weird duck waddled along the shore. It looked more like a goose than a duck, with cinnamon wings streaked in metallic greens and blues, a grey side, red feet, and most peculiarly, a dramatic red eye-patch. Our Audubon's Field Guide to North American Birds contained nothing like it. We returned home befuddled but excited by what we'd seen—an unidentifiable and mysterious goose-like duck or duck-like goose, sneaking through the weeds at the water's edge.

Chris remained determined to classify our find and pulled out his book, "Animals of the World." Buried deep within, we found a picture of an Egyptian Goose, which seemed to be just what we'd seen, although strangely out of place. "That's it," shouted Chris. We rushed to tell our dad, but he laughed. His adult mind blinded him to the possibility of an Egyptian Goose lurking beside the lagoon.

"Hah," Chris snorted when we were alone. "Everything's possible."

The next morning at breakfast, father looked over his newspaper and gave us a firm nod of respect. "There's a story in the Milwaukee Sentinel about an Egyptian Goose escaping from the zoo." Grown-ups believe in magic only if confirmed by reputable sources.



That summer, I discovered that Big Chris, Sammy Val, and Johnny had been stealing from Sanders Drug Store. Although they offered to share their loot with me, I stared at my feet and mumbled, "It's not right to steal."

"Chicken," Johnny said.

"Leave him alone." Chris ruled further teasing off-limits. "He's only six."

To do what I knew was wrong made me nervous, but I didn't want to be left out. With my heart beating rapidly, I accompanied Johnny on my first mission a week later. He sidled to the candy counter to demonstrate proper technique. Every time Mr. Sanders or his assistant was distracted by a customer, Johnny jammed a fistful of candy into his pocket. When they were bulging, he stepped back and nodded.

I wanted to run from the store as fast as I could, but my feet remained motionless. After a nudge from Johnny, I stepped forward—all four feet and fifty-five pounds of me. I palmed a pack of Beechnut gum and shoved it with sweaty hands into my pocket. I heard a shuffling noise and looked up to see Mr. Sanders moving toward me.

He knew us by sight and knew our parents. “What can I do for you?” He peered over the counter with a friendly smile. Unfortunately, Johnny had a hole in his right pocket and a small reef of candy surrounded his foot. Mr. Sanders swiveled his head slowly to the floor. We followed his gaze where we saw, with horror, the jumble of color at which the shopkeeper now glared. Gentleness disappeared from his voice. “Get out of here,” he shouted. “I’m calling your parents.”

Johnny and I bolted from the store but slowed to a crawl as soon as we were out of sight. When we arrived home, I searched for Chris to tell him what had happened. He would know what to do. After listening carefully, he said quietly, “Our goose is cooked.” He motioned me to follow and I marched behind him to confess. I felt small, smaller than my actual height. Our parents would be ashamed of us or, at least, ashamed at what we’d done. Although Chris pushed limits in a way I never did, I could see he felt bad too.

We found mom and dad in the living room. They looked at our glum faces. “What have you boys done?” mother asked.

As we told them, our father’s lips thinned—always a bad sign. “Mr. Sanders works hard for a living. How’d you like it if he broke into our house and stole your train set?” We contemplated this image while shifting uncomfortably from one foot to another. “You march down there right now to tell Mr. Sanders what you’ve done and pay for what you stole.” As we trudged to the drugstore, the trip seemed much longer than normal.

“We’re sorry, Mr. Sanders.” Chris spoke for us when we arrived. I bobbed my head, standing behind Chris like a shadow. We each gave him \$5, our allowance for the month. I wanted to cry because I had done wrong even when I’d known better, and I was relieved we’d been caught and forced to pay up.

“You can come back to the store,” Mr. Sanders said, “but never let me catch you stealing again.” He viewed us through thick glasses. “That’s what bad boys do.”



In one of our many backyard baseball games, Big Chris was at bat. Sammy Val glared at home plate from the pitching mound. None of the older boys on my team wanted to catch, so I was behind the plate. Afraid of fast pitches, I hunched down, hoping for the best. Like a sword, fate hung above us for a moment and then a fastball smacked Chris in the mouth. Whap. One of his last baby canines was knocked out and he trotted home, his mouth crimson.

We continued the game, but I worried about my brother. The next batter either backed up or I failed to reposition myself after Chris was hit. On the backswing, the bat caught me right above the nose. Throbbing with pain, I also hustled home. Mom was icing Chris's mouth when I stumbled in, blood gushing from my nose. She rounded up more towels and ice. Shaking her head, she inspected Chris and I huddled together on the couch in silent misery.

Chris put his arm around my shoulder and I rested against his side, feeling sleepy from the excitement and the slow rise and fall of his chest. Probing the new space in his gums with his tongue, he became reenergized. "That ball was sizzling—probably traveling a hundred miles per hour when it hit me." He opened his mouth and let me see the hole where the tooth had been.

Both my eyes had begun to swell and turn dark; I looked like a raccoon. "We sure got clobbered." I looked at Chris with a big grin. He pulled me closer and I hardly hurt at all.



My first brush with the law occurred two months later; and I was innocent—*innocent*. Whistling and unconcerned, I was walking down the alley beside the Smith's house. When I reached the front, Sammy Val hauled me into the bushes. "Quiet, Beechie. We may be in a pickle."

I wasn't quite sure why it was "we" and what the problem might be until a cop peered over the bushes and stared down at the three of us hunkered on the ground. Apparently, Big Chris and Sammy Val had been lobbing stones in the general direction of cars passing on Ogden Avenue.

"You boys are in a world of trouble," the officer said. After rubbing our faces in the disaster possible if a stone had struck a windshield, the policeman seemed to think turning us over to our

parents with a stern warning was sufficient. Sam's father, a big guy, gave him a shellacking, but our father and mother delivered another lecture along the lines of "what were you thinking?" before exiling us to our room.

"Why were you throwing rocks?" I asked Chris as I pushed my toy soldiers around the floor.

"At first, it was exciting," Chris said. Enthusiasm slowly leached from his face. "We weren't really trying to hit the cars. Just pretend."

Although I understood his explanation, I knew what he'd done wasn't okay. I always strained to stay within the borders of right and wrong, but Chris pushed against rules.



One weekend after my seventh birthday, Chris led a stealthy foray to liberate a stack of cigars from father's black-lacquered humidor. He convinced us that the only logical place to smoke our booty inconspicuously was inside the family car with the windows rolled up. We slumped in the seats to be more invisible. If we could not see anyone outside, no one could see us. We fired up our stogies. After several puffs, our skins matched the grey plume in the car. Johnny bolted first. While the last of his breakfast dribbled to the ground, Sam locked the door. Johnny wasn't pleased, which we surely could have foreseen if we'd thought about it, and as soon as he recovered, he ran to tattle.

Smoking cigars in a closed car was a sin whose punishment was in the act itself. Our parents reviewed two green boys, miserably hanging their heads in front of them. "That was foolish," dad said. Even we knew that by then. "We assume you'll never do anything so stupid in the future." And we didn't; we never locked Johnny out of the car again. But there were so many other stupidities we seemed utterly unable to avoid.

The great peeing contest fell generally within that category. Chris was certain that determining who could pee the farthest was important. As in so many of our escapades, the initial execution went well but quickly degenerated into fiasco.

After he was only able to achieve a modest ten feet, Johnny was appointed referee for our contest. I didn't want to be next because I was nervous we'd be caught. Almost eleven, Chris

possessed formidable bladder pressure and stepped to the line with confidence. His arcing stream reached seventeen feet, a remarkable feat of almost mythic stature.

A small shift in breeze, or perhaps a tiny bounce of his hand, which almost surely would have been an accident, wafted steaming urine all over the lower legs of Johnny's pants, and he trotted off to tell on us—again. Not because he disapproved of the contest but because he'd lost and been peed on to boot.



During the next school year in a snowball fight on our way home, Chris lost his balance, sailed upward, and landed on his back, hitting his head on the ice. When he could stand, I took his hand and led him to the trolley. I sat close as we rode home. He was still goofy when we arrived and mom drove us to the doctor. "Just a mild concussion," the doctor said. "Have him rest and drink liquids; he'll be fine."

A month later in January 1955, we moved from Milwaukee to Washington, D.C. Childhood was eclipsed by adolescence and then young manhood. When Chris developed grand mal epilepsy fifteen years later, it became family lore that his fall was the cause, but he didn't like to talk much about his condition or the difficulty the doctors encountered attempting to discover the right balance of medication to control the seizures. He resented the epilepsy and fought the limits it represented.

By this time, Chris had been married and divorced. After graduating from Berkeley Law School, he returned to Washington, D.C. to live near Johanna, his only child. He started a small general practice and deliberately took on trial work, gritting his teeth each time he entered a court room against the possibility that his medication would fail.

In 1971, I flew home for Christmas from Tacoma. After dinner, Chris and I drove to a tavern to talk. Without warning, he fell to the ground, spasms racking his body. I dropped beside him, took off his glasses, and tried to cushion his thrashing body so he wouldn't hurt himself.

"Call an ambulance," I yelled at the bartender and glared at customers, who were crowding closer around us with looks of unease and fright. Someone gave me a towel to put in Chris's

mouth and the ambulance arrived shortly. I followed it to the hospital and stayed with him until he was released.

“What happened while I was unconscious in the bar?” he asked, worried how his body might have betrayed him in the sight of others.

As I reassured him, I was aware I was crossing a threshold. It was my turn to protect my big brother. I did all I knew to do but still tasted the bitterness of never being fully able to protect the ones we love. Life has consequences and sometimes the best we can do is endure.

Several years later, Chris joined the Board of the Washington Chapter of The Epilepsy Foundation. “Why?” I asked.

“I want people to know you can still do everything, even with epilepsy,” Chris answered. I saw a small boy again, leaping from the top of the jungle gym to embrace the complicated wonder of life, and I felt the bond between us tugging me to follow.

Gray struggled for dominance over black in Chris’s unruly Abraham Lincoln beard as he entered his forties. For a period, he lived on a small island in the Potomac without electricity or indoor plumbing. He canoed across the river to the Maryland side each morning and dressed in a three-piece lawyer suit before racing downtown to work. His personal hygiene may have been subpar at times, but he was a free spirit living the outdoor life. He met and fell in love with Bobbie, a woman who shared his passion for boating.

On the first warm spring day of 1986, the water was high enough to paddle the North River, a small tributary of the Shenandoah. Chris and a friend, Eric, launched in kayaks and Bobbie set off in a canoe. Partway down the river, Bobbie pulled out because she felt uncomfortable with an open boat in the high seasonal flood waters. Chris and Eric were both experienced paddlers with good equipment, enjoying the thrill and challenge of the river.

After five hours, they drifted around a bend near the end of their run and moved left to a channel free of rapids. Without warning, Chris’s kayak lodged sidewise to the current between two half-submerged trees. The kayak collapsed partially and pinned his legs, preventing escape. Eric maneuvered to Chris but could not free him and was swept downstream.

Chris's kayak rolled to the downstream side. Struggling to keep his head above water, Chris reached upstream to grab a bush. Eric raced to a nearby farmhouse and called for rescue, which arrived within 20 minutes; but neither the rescue team, nor Eric, who swam out to Chris in an attempt to dislodge his kayak, could free him or the boat.

Chris battled rising water while the boat slipped deeper, and the rescue team failed in their several efforts to save him. He survived fifty minutes. The emergency squad was able to extricate the kayak from its trap and bring his body to shore only four hours later.

Twenty-six years have passed, but I still reflect on my brother's last minutes. I want to believe hypothermia brought him peace or a seizure took him away from where he was. Harsh realities of isolation, panic, and desperation are images I cannot bear to contemplate.

Chris was the pillar to which I'd been tethered; so much at the center of my life, I cannot separate the story of his childhood from my own. With his death, I was cast loose into a world made smaller by the absence of his cry, arms open and eyes eager: "Follow me. We can fly."