



Source: Andra Jackson, 'There's still a catch for Gaza's boatmen', *The Age online*, 28/12/05.

Tags: [disease](#), [death](#), [dreams](#), [religion](#), [tattoo](#), [travel](#), [water](#)

Writer/s: [Ella Longpre](#)

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Saint Christopher, protect us. The imperative is comforting in itself, even to a non-Catholic—that one could have control over a saint, or assume command over some mythical, canonized figure. I have it tattooed on my forearm, 'Saint Christopher, protect us,' over a picture of Chris, helping a haloed boy cross a river, holding his staff out before him. It's not devout, or ironic, but sentimental. And it serves even less a reminder to me than a mark for the world—proof that I am under this mystic's patronage. It's in the daze of morning that I read it aloud, finding solace in repetition, before the words have lost any chance of hope, before Saint Christopher becomes, again, just another image inked on my skin, only three quarters mine.

The first seizure came a week before my 18th birthday. I was visiting an evangelical church when it happened. Thinking I was possessed, the pastor, with the help of his congregation, exorcized me. As grateful as I was for their efforts, my heathen body continued to convulse sporadically over the next few months. A year later, I was diagnosed with epilepsy, caused, it seemed, by trauma to the head suffered in adolescence. But years passed, my condition is still progressing, and the questions that come up are unanswered. Not questions at all, really, but roads down which one travels to reach a destination. At the end of one road, you only find another. This is the first quarter of Christopher—he is the patron saint of the epileptics.

I was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder just a few months before the first seizure. My psychiatrist, who also counselled veterans and military personnel, explained that, when the body undergoes stress, trauma, abuse, the brain is left with an imprint of that stress. This affects one's reactions to future stress and one's mood and outlook. PTSD, he said, is caused by extreme trauma, and is most common among soldiers and victims of sexual

abuse. It can leave the survivor with a feeling of a particularly unique history, access to an unknown facet of human experience, an alienation from the remaining ignorant. This is the second quarter of Christopher—he is the patron saint of the soldier.

He is also the patron saint of the wanderer, the third quarter. My blood or my nature, one or both are pulling me year after year to move on, to find new homes, new identities, to find one road at the end of another. Restlessness is whiskey for the head.

It was that restlessness that brought me to a house by the sea. Southern California, actually, on the bay. An older couple accepted a ragamuffin stranger into their home, some fatherless, penniless girl to take in and take care of. Bill and Dorothy—this couple—became my family. This is the fourth quarter of Christopher—he is the patron saint of the sailor. This is the quarter that is not mine.

Bill and Dorothy met in California, following Bill's return to the states, after serving in the war, in the navy. They raised their children on the Pacific Ocean, moving up and down the coast, never having the shoreline out of sight. Three years after I met him, Bill went back out to sea. He died in his sleep as I talked with Dorothy on the telephone, drifting out silently, leaving the rest of us behind to stand on shore, to follow one road after the next, true wanderers. All of those who have gone back to sea, they are kept only by their remnants on dry land. They are protected by the fallible fabric of memories. This is the hope I hold onto in the daze of morning, the hope that fades, repeating, Saint Christopher, protect us. The haloed boy crossing the river, carried by a dream.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ella Longpre.*