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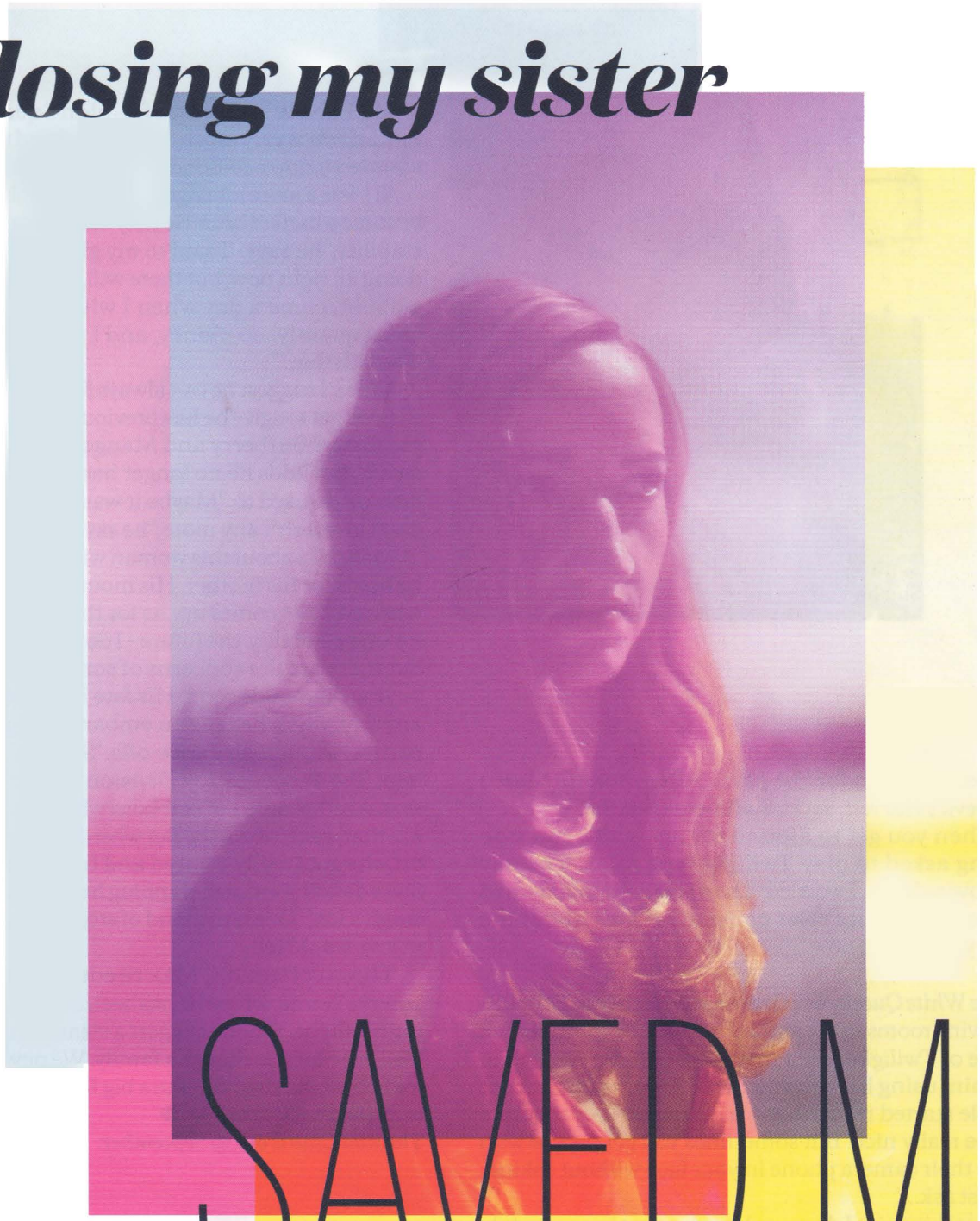
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How

# losing my sister



# SAVED ME

*Mélanie Berliet watched her sister fight a long and painful battle with alcoholism. The tragic experience forced her to radically change her own life*

Photography **Samantha Casolari**

At my sister's funeral, I hugged the urn containing her ashes. Then I kissed the surprisingly heavy vessel and placed it before her tombstone, understanding what my role would now always be. I must live times two: for both her and me.

Days after my older sister Céline succumbed to cirrhosis, the result of her alcoholism, on 5 April 2009, aged 30, I was searching through her dresser for an outfit she might deem 'coffin appropriate', grateful for the break from fielding sympathetic calls. That's where I found it: a small black-and-white notebook peeking out from beneath crumpled clothing. It contained one single journal entry, which Céline had drafted during a brief stay at the psychiatric ward of Saint Vincent's hospital in lower Manhattan. She had landed there after a particularly bad bout with the bottle, which led ER doctors to diagnose her as depressive, and potentially suicidal. I imagined Céline there. Had she made friends, I wondered? Had she been able to sleep?

As I read those pages, which concluded with a quote by artist Brian Andreas ('She said she usually cried at least once each day, not because she was sad, but because the world was so beautiful and life was so short'), I admired the perfectly slanted penmanship I'd long tried, but failed, to mimic. In spite of suffering from severe liver failure - her skin green from bile, stomach bloated - my sister's tone was wryly amused. What struck me more than her strength in the face of physical decay, however, was the realisation that, in dying, my sister had given me the gift of perspective.

The maxim at the core of Andreas' line is familiar: life is short. But it's one thing to be told it, and quite another to stare this truth in the eyes. Clutching the journal, I wept, not because alcohol had finally taken her, but because I saw how many of my own choices had been informed by her illness.

*'I wept, not because alcoholism had finally taken her, but because I saw how many of my own choices were informed by her illness'*

Céline was three years old when I robbed her of 'only child' status. In a few ways, we were similar: raised in the same suburban home, in the same safe town, by the same loving parents. But there were also stark differences. She was a chubby, gentle brunette; I was thin, blonde, stubborn, kinetic. She picked dandelions on the sidelines at soccer games, while I rocketed across the field. She played Mozart on the piano with ease, while my hands struggled to keep time. She was messy, I kept a museum-neat bedroom. She was friends with the smokers, goths and theatre kids. I pranced around with the jocks.

Yet I always looked up to my brilliant sister. I began every school year with a teacher who had already instructed Céline, and who inevitably revered her for her sharp wit, indiscriminate compassion and insightfulness. She paved the way for me. It never made sense to me that Céline was so introspective - that she would disappear for hours to 'ponder the meaning of life' instead of helping me build a fort in the living room - but I recognised our bond. She was my babysitter, my confidante and my trusted adviser

on matters of the heart. She may not have had the right haircut, but my sister knew exactly when to blast Cat Stevens to make a girl who cared too much about the right outfit smile.

The signs that she might go off the rails were never really there - Céline never got into trouble for drinking while she was living under my parents' roof, and never came home wasted. But, looking back, she did always love to indulge in a few glasses of champagne on special occasions. She had a taste for alcohol, even as a young adolescent, that I never shared. During college, she began to drink more frequently, probably enjoying the freedom that comes with a more flexible schedule. I remember speaking to her on the phone a few times when I suspected she was pretty wasted, but the calls always came at night so I wasn't concerned. When she and I hung out around that time, we would get tipsy together and I noticed that her tolerance was far greater than mine was (she could handle at least twice the quantity I could).

Naturally, after graduating from university in 2003, I took the polar opposite path from Céline. Intent on making big bucks so I could



live the high life, I moved to New York to pursue a career as a trader on Wall Street. My sister, meanwhile, was living off a paltry stipend, working towards a PhD in Classics at New York University. What I didn't realise was that Céline was simultaneously working towards becoming a spectacular alcoholic. In 1999, before starting her doctorate, Céline took a job teaching Latin at a boarding school in Arizona. After her death, I spoke with one of her former colleagues, who told me that Céline had developed the habit of taking a shot before each of the classes she taught to calm her nerves.

Her problems really blossomed upon entering 'the real world', which terrified her. The signs were easy to ignore at first, partly because I was too distracted by my new job to see her much. When we did get together, we fell into old patterns. I was envious of her lifestyle, and the fact that she genuinely didn't care about money. Céline found my career choice amusing, and she happily allowed me to pick up the bill whenever we met up.

Over time, though, there was an almost imperceptible shift. Any discussion related to the future became anathema to Céline. When asked what her plans were, she shut down completely. Struggling to grasp why she suddenly seemed so fragile, I settled upon the theory that she was just too clever and reflective for her own good.

But any doubt about Céline's problem soon disappeared. The evidence that she was drinking at all times of day had begun to pile high around the time, in 2005, when she was scheduled to meet our mother at the airport at 10am to embark on a trip to Colorado. 'She was too bombed to board,' Mom reported. In the name of addressing 'the issue', I asked Céline to join me for dinner a week later. As my sister stood to go to the bathroom, the clanking of keys against a glass bottle sounded from deep within her handbag, like the fire alarm for a drill we both yearned to ignore. She was retreating for an extra swig of vodka.

*'As she stood, the clanking of keys against a bottle sounded from inside her bag, like a fire alarm we both yearned to ignore'*

I was supposed to say something, but I was drinking my fair share of wine, so who was I to reprimand her? I didn't want to play the big sister. That wasn't my role.

Our eyes challenged each other, but my lips wouldn't move. Hers got there first. 'Why do you always assume the worst of me?' she asked. I wondered: Why her, not me? Life might have seemed easier for me, but, in truth, I was increasingly dissatisfied by my job, which left me feeling creatively starved and lonely, too exhausted to socialise or date. I stared at tiny neon font on six flat-screen computers for 12 hours a day with barely a break to go to the bathroom, lest I miss the most lucrative trade of the day. What had once seemed glamorous now seemed miserably mind-numbing. I could understand the urge to drown one's sorrows. Were Céline's demons - which seemed rooted in an endless, futile quest for meaning - more powerful than mine? Or was I at risk of falling off the edge, too?

For months, my parents, my little brother and I vacillated between 'tough love' and enabling. Céline, on the other hand, was consistent in her shocking behaviour. There were several collapses in public. She was mugged on a subway platform at 2am. She confessed that she needed an abortion, but couldn't recall exactly how she'd become pregnant. She quit her PhD course.

Although the circumstances surrounding her surrender were seriously troubling, it was a happy day when Céline finally agreed to go to rehab. By then, the whites of her eyes and her skin had adopted their Kermit the Frog hue, a symptom of advanced cirrhosis. Without a source of income or the chance of securing even the most menial job, treatment was a last resort. I sent my sister a care package including a bag of her favourite sweets, a handwritten letter commending her courage, and a copy of James Frey's addiction memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, which I'd read in an attempt to understand her better.

Two weeks later, the unopened parcel appeared at my doorstep, which could only mean one thing: my sister had checked herself out >

early. Sifting through the contents of that boomerang box, I realised that while I couldn't change the course of my sister's life, I had to improve my own. At that point in 2006, I felt trapped by the very job I'd chosen to free myself from the weight of financial concerns. So without any semblance of an alternative plan, I quit. I had no idea what I wanted to do next, or how I would pay rent after my savings ran out in six months' time, but I felt a sudden sense of urgency. For eight months, I stopped speaking to Céline, which seemed like the only way to sort my head out. You can't help anyone else until you put on your own oxygen mask first.

When I woke up to 10 missed calls from my parents one morning in 2007, I knew something bad had happened overnight. Sure enough, Céline had come very close to dying. On autopilot, I threw on some yoga pants and a T-shirt and headed to the hospital. In the intensive care unit, the resentment disintegrated when I looked at my broken sister lying between stiff, white sheets on a narrow bed.

I lingered there for hours, telling her bad jokes and asking harmless questions, careful not to trespass across her well-defined boundaries. My secretive sister offered information about her medical condition: only 2% of her liver worked as it should. 'I feel like a fish out of water here on Earth,' she said. 'Misplaced.'

Since leaving Wall Street the year before, I had found myself reading obsessively and writing in my journal. I sensed this might be pointing me in the right direction, but had taken a part-time job as an administrative assistant to make ends meet while I explored more sensible options. Standing alongside Céline, though, I finally saw that nothing was more sensible than pursuing what I loved.

I pledged to try to make it as a writer, starting from scratch. I also resolved to pursue the man I'd fallen for, even though technically he was still married. From the minute I met Smithe, I knew I could love him, but I was intimidated by the complications. I had more to lose, it now felt, by

not following my heart. If my sister's rapid demise from scholar to fall-down drunk had taught me anything, it was that nothing is definite.

Céline did not stop drinking. In fact, from 2008 to 2009, she was hospitalised eight times for varying lengths of time, each episode more traumatic and prolonged than the next.

As my sister got sicker, I pushed my boundaries further because she couldn't, and because life was too fragile not to. I cared less about what others thought, so I pitched stories that involved going undercover to get the inside story on subcultures, which enabled me to establish a niche as an immersive journalist. I also continued to see the love of my life, despite the fact that society frowns upon dating someone during the purgatory that precedes official divorce (five years later, we're still together). Through losing my sister, gradually and then finally, I was empowered.

Let me be clear: there is nothing - *nothing* - good about losing a sister. But from the wreckage, I managed to salvage one thing: I was able to recast myself as creative, something that I had previously considered her territory. Inadvertently or not, Céline taught me that life is too short not to be embraced. ●

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