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Zoe McConnell

TEEN SPIRIT

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confronts her
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'I've never met
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'MY SISTER DRANK HERSELF TO DEATH'

What happens when your smart, funny, cool big sis can't stop drinking? Writer Mélanie Berliet, 32, found out when her sister Céline lost her battle with alcoholism aged 30

'Sitting on the train recently, I saw an old homeless man, toothlessly belting out Abba's *Dancing Queen*. It was my sister Céline's favourite song, and I knew it would have cracked her up. For a split second, I thought about calling her.

Then it hit me - I couldn't tell her anything ever again.

A raging alcoholic by 23, Céline was seriously ill by 25 and dead at 30. My smart, funny, beautiful big sister drank her way to terminal liver failure. Her grim death, during which her skin turned green as toxins flooded her body, was the stuff of nightmares - and changed my own life forever.

Céline was three years older than me and brilliant at everything. I had to study hard for good marks at school in Connecticut, in the US, whereas she easily excelled. I was sporty and wanted everyone to like me, while Céline was part of a cooler, edgier crowd. But

despite our differences, we were always close. We had exactly the same sense of humour - we'd burst out laughing at the same things, while our parents, Martine, now 60, and Jean-Pierre, now 70, and our younger brother Damien, now 29, looked on bemused.

Céline was always the one in charge, the mischief maker. She would persuade me to moon our neighbours who were called the Mooneys, or wear my hair in three pigtails to school. But when she was a teenager, she started suffering from panic attacks and anxiety. Mum and Dad were baffled, and Céline refused to discuss it with any of us.

After school, we both went to university - Céline to Columbia in New York to do Classics, while I studied political economics at Georgetown in Washington. That's when her drinking problem started, but I didn't realise it at the time. Céline got wasted sometimes, but all students did that, and she was still acing all her exams.

After I graduated in 2003, I went to work on Wall Street in New York. Céline, meanwhile, moved into her own place and started studying for a PhD in Classics. Our lives were going down different paths, but we still met up all the time for dinner and drinks. Sometimes I'd smell booze on her

'JUST 2% OF HER LIVER WAS WORKING'

breath, or she'd sneak off to the loo several times during dinner, but I couldn't bring myself to voice my nagging suspicions.

Then in 2005, during a trip to the Grand Canyon with our parents, Céline got so drunk she wasn't allowed on the flight. Mum was shocked and embarrassed, while I tried to tell myself it was a one-off - I hadn't shared my concerns about her drinking with my parents.

A few months later, however, Céline went on a binge that ended in A&E, followed by a failed trip to rehab - she checked herself out after a few days. After that, it was a downwards spiral. Céline dropped out of her PhD programme and lost her part-time job as a nanny. She stopped eating, would reek of booze and be covered in bruises and scrapes she had no idea how she'd got. She didn't pay her rent for months, and had an abortion after a sexual encounter she could barely remember.

My parents and I tried to get Céline to stop - we begged, pleaded, and threatened. We were worried sick, but nothing did any good, and we couldn't just lock her up in rehab, no matter how much we wanted to.

In desperation, I stopped talking to her for a while. I hoped some tough love would finally get through to her, but I backed down when she ended up in hospital with cirrhosis of the liver in spring 2008, and immediately rushed to her side. She looked terrible - her eyes sunken in

I'd take her favourite food, like chocolate-chip cookies and pizza, to her apartment, but nothing could tempt her to eat.

Then, all of a sudden on April 3, 2009, Céline was rushed into hospital with septic shock. She lapsed into a coma, but it wasn't peaceful - she didn't slip away quietly. Seizures made her body spasm so violently, Dad had to grip her ankles while Mum cradled her head. It was horrific to see her like that. I wanted to scream that I loved her, but I couldn't move a muscle. Céline died in our arms at 5pm that day.

The rest of that week was so surreal. Most of her friends hadn't even known about her problem - she was too proud to tell them or ask for help. But they came in their droves for her funeral, while I wrestled with overwhelming grief, sadness for my parents and a guilty kind of relief that it was finally over. Most of all, though, I just stumbled around in a daze, asking myself what the hell had happened to my sister.

But no matter how much I retraced our childhood looking for clues, I couldn't figure it out. Céline was so smart, she excelled at everything - even being an alcoholic. As for me, her death made me look at my own life anew. I decided to leave my finance job and try to become a writer - something I'd always wanted to do, but been too scared to try. If my sister's death had taught me anything, it was that life was precious.

I started working as a freelance writer, and it wasn't long before I began to write about Céline. Gradually, it turned into a book. It was hard to relive it all, but therapeutic too, especially when I found out that a few of her old friends had named their children after her.

I like to think the old man singing was a sign from her, letting me know she's OK. I hope that wherever she is, she's finally at peace." **F**

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Fyi

Hospital admissions in England for people aged under 30 with alcohol-related liver disease have increased by 117 per cent in the past decade. In the North-East, the increase is 400 per cent.*

Alcohol is now 44 per cent more affordable than it was in 1980.*

More than one in 10 women drink double the daily recommended units of alcohol at least once a week.*

her head, tubes snaking out of her skeletal arms - and I realised then that she was never going to stop drinking.

Despite undergoing therapy and being prescribed drugs to treat her anxiety, Céline was in and out of hospital constantly after that, as her liver kept failing. It was obvious she was getting worse, but we were in the dark about the specifics - she wouldn't let us speak to her doctors and refused to share any information with us. Only once did she let slip that just two per cent of her liver was working. It was shocking - that level of damage was usually seen in older alcoholics who had been drinking their entire lives.

We never spoke about it, but she knew the end was coming, she was just too proud to admit it. She never tried to explain or ask for forgiveness - I think she felt she didn't deserve it. By the time she was 30, she looked worse than ever. Emaciated and frail as a bird, her skin was tinged greenish-yellow because her liver couldn't filter bile. She had no appetite because she was drinking so much - we think it was around a litre of vodka a day.

