

Christine was sort-of opinionated. Circa age 11 she was often the first to experience many things. Perhaps this along with the dynamic of being the oldest of three equipped her with an immense sense of responsibility. With the best of intentions, she shattered the innocence and naivety of sheltered youth (such as myself) by imparting her experience and wisdom upon us. While others saw this as unsolicited advice, I listened intently. Not everyone can handle the truth.

You see, I enjoyed a blissfully sheltered childhood. One where I frolicked in a magical garden paradise. Fortunately, Christine was a pre-teen with principles and this was just not going to do. Thanks to a combination of her extensive horror film education and Catholic upbringing, she knew what would happen if I encountered a snake and ate the apple.

I'm not sure if she targeted me or if it was by chance. I wish she was here to ask. Fortunately, Christine taught me that stories don't always have to be a perfect representation of reality. You just have to do what you have to do to get your point across and not lose people's interest, like Christine's.

I've decided that she first realized how fragile I was during a night at girl scout sleep away camp. Amidst the shadows and dark trees, she and her cronies confronted me with an incredibly dark tale of a sinister bloody knife. The type of tale accompanied by low synth chords that start off loud and fade away. In true Christine fashion she really stressed the point, which was to say that the blade was found under my cot! It was already too much for me to bear but when it got personal her punchline pierced me like a viper striking a helpless baby rabbit.

Like a flock of mother geese, the troop leaders swooped in to save me, as they scolded Christine for her insensitivity. Their chiding honks bounced off an invisible forcefield that was created while Christine stared in fascination at my big eyes brimming with angelic tears. You see, in that moment she fell in love with me.

After the camp incident I can't say that I was particularly interested in being her friend. Regardless, our relationship continued to be punctuated by small encounters and annual Halloween Parties at her home on Pond Road. Each year my costume was a different version of homemade glitter fairy while Christine was a creature of the grim reaper or demagorgon variety. I'm not sure of the root of her fixation on darkness. It was probably a combination of experience and something within.

In those early years, Christine recklessly tested my prude waters any chance she could get, breaking down my innocence one terrifying but skin-thickening lesson at a time. I still remember the feel of the of the tampax instruction manual as I nervously folded and unfolded the creases with sweaty palms. I was transfixed as Christine casually held up a screwdriver to illustrate everything I needed to know about a tampon. It was a gift that she could bring humor to the most embarrassing time in a person's life.

On another ordinary day, Christine decided to see if I would know where to run in the likely event that a crazed ax murderer snuck into my home. Like all naive victims, I cornered myself in an upstairs bedroom. Fortunately, she did not skillfully brandish a large knife from behind her wrist..... this time. As she pounced at me I realized that my fear had equipped me with great strength and I threw her across the room. Her lesson was complete. She was proud.

That was our relationship prior to the summer of 10th grade when our stars really aligned. As fate would have it, we were simultaneously becoming aware of appearances, starving for acceptance in a merciless teenage social order. I don't remember why she called me that day. The cordless phone pressed against my ear as I sat on the scratchy brown carpet of my childhood bedroom floor. As I stared at glistening dust particles suspended in golden sunshine, our souls fused together as we made the leap toward awareness together. After that moment, and for the rest of high school, we spent a total of 2 1/2 minutes apart.

That phone call was truly a pivotal moment in our relationship. In that conversation we become a world of two planets, orbiting each other. She always wanted to talk about the memories. I'm not exactly sure why but like a kid whose mom was telling the same embarrassing story for the hundredth time, I sort of avoided them. Now, I wish I could remember more. I wish she was here to fill in the gaps. I wonder if you feel the same way. Maybe we can help each other. Here are a few memories that come to mind:

- Used cars. Christine and her sisters always had one. Those poor cars. Fortunately, all minor accidents. Like her 1990 something Oldsmobile bottoming out and skidding to a stop on a bridge in the middle of Mendon. Something that holds the wheels in place just fell off. Or the time they lost Kelly's car, only for it to mysteriously appear in the valley between their house and the neighbor's. I think that day we all learned about the E-Break. Then there was that time that I was beyond terrified to go on my first date. So, Christine decided to skip evening church to escort me safely. As we barreled through the night in her parent's minivan, a crazed deer struck the sliding door. While God may have seen it as punishment for skipping church, the irony of it all actually made for an incredible ice-breaker at the animal's expense.

- Then there was her sense of adventure. Always on the hunt for a good time. She would type away at the keys of her little flip phone to plan our social calendar which mostly consisted of us doing things by ourselves together, or with Ashley, or our cool yet quirky group of five guy friends from the grade below. So we went to concerts. As teenagers do we began to explore our identity through music. We related to the angst of pop punk and relished in the excitement of sweaty bodies bouncing off of each other in the dark rooms of musty music halls. One night, in the midst of an epic but small mosh pit whose energy was fed by the sounds of our friends playing on stage, Christine's tooth collided with my face, in slow motion. My cheek swelled fast as blood trickled down it. We scoffed as someone's mom demanded I get stitches and walked back to the pit. Eventually the only black eye I ever had faded away but a small scar of Christine's tooth impression has remained. She was incredibly fond of this mark and looked for it every time we were together in the years since.
- There are the little things too. Like her phone number which I still have memorized. Like how I always ate her pizza crust. Her purse, littered with peppermint flavored orbit gum wrappers and tubes of cherry chapstick. Her favorite brand of waterproof mascara that I felt the need to wear in her honor today. The Tracy Chapman cassette tape we listened to on repeat in her car. How forcefully she tossed and turned in her sleep. Meticulously doing our hair and absentmindedly leaving the straightener on, on the bed, only to sit on it hours later. Denying wearing Katie's clothes. A 1 foot deep layer of laundry coating her bedroom floor. The stairway we sat at together during school lunch. Her hatred of uncomfortable footwear.
- Here's a cool one: Stealing campaign signs and putting them in opposing party supporter's yards. Another cool one: I'd sleep over at her house every weekend and eventually every school night. On Saturdays we'd eat caesar salads and religiously watch a dating show called 3rd Wheel and an educational show called Sex with Sue. You need context to understand content so I doubt we really learned anything.
- Then there are bigger picture things, like her commitment to work and determination to pay her own way, even as a teenager. Her intense ambition which led to a successful career. Her natural aptitude for politics and strategy. Her opinions that were so strong she probably still has them. Her incredible loyalty as a friend. Her unwavering support through my darkest times. Her intelligence and sense of humor. Her love of storytelling and flare for drama. Her time on the swim team and success as an athlete. Her love for hiking and of nature. Her strong connection with her parents and sisters.

Eventually, we went off to separate colleges. As I floundered in indecisiveness I confided in her that I was considering a switch of majors from fine art to psychology. I vividly remember her response being this: "Some people go to college for knowledge, some people go to get a job". I don't know how she knew that, but it resonated with me. So, I discarded the self-fulfilling pursuit of psychology and stuck with art. I got the sense that she was okay with that and that meant a lot to me.

As the years went by we chose paths in different places. Slowly growing apart but always staying in touch. Over the last two years, when she mentioned a book she liked I would try to read it to so I could feel more connected. A few months ago when Christine got her job with NASA she called me and made a joke that, however intimidating, planning a party for rocket scientists is NOT rocket science. It was good to laugh with her. I always loved her sense of humor and something about this particular joke felt familiar. Shortly after that we talked again. My daughter had just given her friend a non-consensual haircut. The punchline was good and Christine ate it up. She always relished in a good story with a bit of humor at the expense of someone else's (minor) misfortune. I thought maybe we'd talk more often.

I used to think that I'd be making a speech like this at Christine's wedding. If there was one person I was certain I would do that for, it was her. But I never did.

I don't know if anyone will ever love me like she did. Creepily, she once implied that part of what she loved about Charles was that he looked like me. Now that Christine is gone, I feel a void, like reaching in the darkness of space for something that will never be there and having to catch my balance. As a small act of preservation, I will never remove her from speed dial on my phone. I've come to realize that over the last few years, Christine stopped telling me everything. I think it was a different form of protection than where we started out. Maybe she was shielding me, allowing me to continue to experience the part of her that had become my best friend years ago. I wish she hadn't done that. Or maybe it's a gift that she did. I last spoke with her about a month before she passed. I could tell she was having a hard time.

It's happens to me almost every day. Like a reflex. Where I stop and think I should call Christine. I want to call Christine. I want her to meet my son who was born last fall, and see how my daughter has grown and what she's becoming.

I'm able to think about Christine most when I am driving with music on. I can picture her 16 year old self next to me. Singing, laughing, long blonde hair in the wind. Charles told me she'd been listening to an old favorite song on repeat. I know what and who it made her think of because it makes me think of the same things. A golden time that we took for granted. When we thought we were adults but we were still just playing pretend.

In my grief I noticed so much beauty in the world. The lyrics to a song, dancing shadows, the smoothness of my son's baby skin. Why are our senses amplified when we're sad? I heard once that a way to experience gratitude is to imagine your life without something or someone that you love. When you don't have to imagine it's easier. So thank you Christine. I am thankful for you. For all the beauty. For everything you taught me. For for all the memories and for who I am.