

Two Girls, Two Bodies

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This is a stick figure drawing of me and my best friend Kristin.

I'm the skinny one who is long and tall with no real curves or bumps.

Kristin is the shapely one with the round parts on top and the wavy lines on the bottom.

We've been best friends since graduating college. We've always been different, in life and in our bodies, and our feelings about both have fluctuated wildly over the years. At first it might seem easy to be tall and thin, waifey and Paltrow-esque looking like me. But try living in Los Angeles with that body... where girls with hips and boobies will always outshine the androgynous, pre-pubescent, she-looks-hungry-girl. On the flip side, there are Kristin's hang-ups about her Bridgett Bardow physique, and is 'zophtic' just a big word for someone who's fat?

Honestly, I think it has always been easier for me because no matter how unshapely clothing might look on my size-four-body, women admire women who are thin. We've seen this all our lives in magazines, TV and film, and in the way most of our mother's talk about the women's bodies they admire. I believe women dress, and subsequently eat, for other women's approval, even though we believe we are doing so to be attractive to men. It's kind of ironic that as women, we're doing this to ourselves.

Kristin has always had a tougher time with how she perceived her body.

She developed a size D chest at about 17 years old, after she had already become comfortable with having little boobies and enjoying things like jogging and wearing tight t-shirts. Kristin has always felt her chest was the first thing everyone noticed and her body was just out of proportion. She would squish her breasts down, push them together and say ‘look at the difference.’ With a smaller chest, she truly did seem so much thinner and girl-ish... that thing we all kind of aspire to.

For six years I watched Kristin hope, fight, and pray to have the ‘right’ insurance and the ‘right’ doctor who would ‘OK’ a breast reduction surgery so she could look the way ‘she was supposed to’ or ‘better’ by our pop culture standard. When she finally achieved a comfortable income, she also attained ‘great’ insurance for the first time in her life. Magically, she was approved for surgery.

Kristin had a breast reduction on July 23rd 1996 at twenty-seven years old.

Later that same summer, she subsequently had a massive heart attack and died on September 7th.

September 7th is my birthday. I was stuck in LA away from home for the night, sitting by a phone, waiting to hear if my new TV show was “a go.” In NY, Kristin was out on a date with one of my friends from high school. They had a wonderful time together and were heading home to our NY apartment to call and wish me birthday luck for the show. On their way up to our home, Kristin experienced heart failure and died in the elevator.

When the phone rang in my LA apartment, I answered with baited breath expecting a producer with good news. It was my high school friend she had gone on the date with.

He was screaming and yelling:

“She’s dead Diane, she’s dead, I can’t make her breath. Kristin’s dead.”

With no notice, no sickness, no time for good-byes, my dearest friend was gone. At twenty-seven years old her life was over. When you’re single, men come and go but girlfriends are supposed to be forever. She was the one I expected in the ugly taffeta dress in my wedding. She was the old lady I wanted to sit outside the home with and hawk at the young boys passing by. Instead I was left with the unbearable job of packing up everything she owned and handing them back to her Mom and Dad.

Why you ask? Here are some facts:

Kristin had a heart condition called IHSS. It is not fatal. All of her family members have it and are happily living to ripe old ages, bearing children, raising families, and enjoying their lives. Kristin’s death certificate states she died of Sudden Death Syndrome (like SIDS in babies.) How does this happen to a 27 year old? Why does it? We’ll never know for sure.

An autopsy of Kristin’s body would have had to include a ‘full autopsy’ - not just her chest cavity where here overburdened heart called it quits, but her head as well. This full autopsy would have left the hundreds of twentysomething’s that attended her funeral with no closure, and no opportunity to say good-bye to a girl who was not sick and who left this world with no notice. So we had no concrete evidence but one thing stands out again

and again. The only difference between me getting in that elevator every day of my life and walking out alive, and Kristin walking in that elevator one day and never taking another breath, was an “elective surgery” six weeks before her death.

My fellow females listen to this:

ALL surgeries that require general anesthesia carry the risk of death, 100% of the time.

All surgeries. Women may be asking health care professionals for elective surgeries such as breast reductions for medical reasons. (Breast reductions can be very beneficial for things like back problems.) But more often than not, women are more honestly asking for this surgery for cosmetic reasons, although it may help with a back problem. It’s high time that all women started to think twice if the medical conditions you are trying to alleviate are so dire that it is worth risking your life; never mind looking at the priority of changing a part of your anatomy, for aesthetic reasons, that could leave you dead.

At twenty-seven years old.

It was Kristin’s decision to undertake this risk and she fought hard to have the surgery. I blame no one for her death but you could imagine how everyone that loved her feels now and how we wish we could have advised her then. I know all too well that her mother would lay down her own life to take that breast surgery back. I know her sister would love to share her son with the only Aunt he would have ever had. The eulogy I wrote as the last letter to my best friend gave me no solace and five years later she has still irrevocably changed my outlook on life. I know my birthday is blessed because I came in

through her out door, but it makes it very difficult every year to not wonder where we might be celebrating it if we just had a little more time together.

We have so much power to change the way they look, and supposedly feel, with plastic surgery but I think we should stand back for one moment and look at what's really important. Yes there are days when my butt feels too big for my pants, my body, and my life... and sometimes I wish my nose could be smaller/thinner/invisible... but plastic surgery was never something I considered. I change my pants or I cut my hair and I hope that I can make my conversation line more interesting than how pockets fall around the curve of my legs or how the light hits my face in profile. After five years of bartering with God over what I would give him for just five more minutes of coffee talk with my best friend, plastic surgery is something I now loath.

I don't judge my friend for her choice. If it made her last days happier, maybe that happiness is just what life is about. Nor do I judge anyone else who takes this route to feel better about the person that they are. But for the next beautiful, majestic woman who wonders what the possible outcome of this uplifting, rearranging, increasing or decreasing surgery might bring them, take five minutes to understand what it might do to every single person who loves you if anything ever went wrong.

Surgery is still surgery, it is a risk that puts you in possible danger and life is still wonderful for those of us who have it to share with the people we love most.

This year on the anniversary of my best friend's death, I blew out my birthday candles and wished for her laugh to stop fading from my memory. I could draw you another stick figure drawing, of me five years later. My body looks the same as the old one, having come in and out of fashion through the years, although I remain the same. Only the drawing would be different now because although I have the same body, I will never again be the same girl. In my drawing I am now surrounded by other friends, old ones and new ones, who are all wonderful -- but will never replace the other half of my stick figure drawing. My best friend is gone forever, and she took a little piece of me and my heart with her, even though it doesn't show in my stick figure drawing. Which is so ironic because five years ago when I drew these pictures of Kristin and me, our hearts were not important. It was the curves and lines that mattered. Now I can see clearly the thing we should have been worrying about were our hearts; because it was our hearts that made us friends. It was our hearts that made us beautiful women. Now it is our hearts that are so different because mine is still beating and hers is at rest. Maybe it's Kristin's death that has given me a better understanding that it is your heart you should spend time nurturing and fixing up so it can be the best it can be. Not your curves or your bumps.

I suppose that's where the missing piece of my heart is. I think Kristin took it with her so I will never forget what really matters. The greatest birthday gift I could ask for is for just one woman who hasn't thought of the ramifications of her "elective surgery" to consider that your life and your presence is the most precious gift you can give to anyone. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that.

Take it from me and Kristin.