The Friend: Love Is Not a Big Enough Word

His wife was just thirty-four. They had two little girls. The cancer was everywhere, and the parts of dying that nobody talks about were about to start. His best friend came to help out for a couple weeks. And he never left.

By Matthew Teague
May 10, 2015

Most of September 17, 2012, has evaporated from my mind. I still have a few memories. I have the way the surgeon's voice shook. I remember my wife calling my name while she was still under sedation. And I have an image of the hospital floor, up close. I remember white tile and a hope: Maybe I will never have to get up. Maybe they will just let me die here.

Nicole was thirty-four, and the doctor had been direct: "It's everywhere," he said. "Like somebody dipped a paintbrush in cancer and flicked it around her abdomen." I staggered down a hallway and then collapsed. I remember the tile, close to my face, and then watching it retreat as my best friend picked me up from the floor. His name is Dane Faucheux, and I remember noting, even in the midst of a mental fugue: Dane's a lot stronger than I realized.

I was in shock and stayed there a long time. We don't tell each other the truth about dying, as a people. Not real dying. Real dying, regular and mundane dying, is so hard and so ugly that it becomes the worst thing of all: It's grotesque. It's undignified. No one ever told me the truth about it, not once. When it happened to my beloved, I lost my footing in more than one way. The tiled floor of life—morals, ethics, even laws—became a shifting and relative thing. I smuggled drugs. Lied. Hid money from the IRS.

I think I've hung on to the sensation of the hospital floor and being lifted away from it because it captures everything that followed in the next two years. The shock of mortality. One man's collapse. And another man's refusal to let it happen.
Dane Faucheux and Nicole went to college together, and over the years Matt and Dane became as close as brothers.

***

Dane decided to move in around Christmas 2013, on the night our dog died.

Almost all of that year is lost to me. Nicole had ovarian cancer, which had metastasized to her stomach, and she endured a series of physical insults that, taken individually, would have been shattering; a single trip to the chemo ward, watching what looked like antifreeze flow into her veins while the nurses offered me cheese crackers, would have changed my life forever. Taken together, though, the surgeries and chemicals all form a smear that can't be taken apart and examined.
I do have a few recollections from that year, and Dane appears in each. For instance, when Nicole started finding hair on her pillow, I braced for her agony, because she was so young and so beautiful. But she asked me to meet her in the living room with a towel, scissors, and my beard trimmer.

She dragged a chair into the middle of the room and pulled her hair—long and dark and cascading—into a ponytail. "Go ahead," she said.

I sawed at it with the scissors until it came free in my hand. She looked up with wet eyes and smiled.
"I might as well rock this," she said. "Give me a Mohawk."

Afterward, we stepped into a bathroom so that she could look in a mirror. She was Creek Indian, and I had never seen her cheekbones so proud, her eyes so defiant.

I sent a photo of her to Dane, and a few minutes later he sent one back. He had carved a Mohawk of his own to match hers.

Nicole laughed. We had met Dane fifteen years earlier, when we all lived in New Orleans and they were in college together. Men trailed Nicole everywhere; in grocery stores men would follow her from produce to dairy and out into the parking lot. When she smiled, men imagined she needed them, and she smiled a lot. So I had developed a pitying skepticism of other men's motivations. But even when Dane didn't know I was watching, he averted his gaze from her body, and he accepted her smile as nothing more than a small gift. He offered us his friendship with such humility, such deference to our marriage, that I trusted him from the beginning. I'm not sure Nicole ever forgave us for both being men, because over the years it allowed me to grow close to him in a way she never could.

His expressions of affection were, for her, tiny victories. So when she held up the photo of him with a Mohawk and laughed —"Look! Ha ha!"—I knew she meant it in the most competitive, gloating way possible.

"No one ever told me the truth about dying," says Teague. "Not once. When it happened to my beloved, I lost my footing in more than one way."

In a season of butchery and wreckage and defeat, she had triumphed. I asked Dane later why he had done it. He didn't understand the question. "It was more fun than me just shaving my head bald," he said. It had never occurred to him to do nothing.

Later that year, I remember him standing sentry at the hospital. He had driven from New Orleans—we were living in a small
town called Fairhope, Alabama—to stand guard for hours in the hallway outside Nicole's room so that she could sleep. One afternoon, a group of church ladies arrived. There is no force under heaven as mighty as a band of middle-aged Baptist ladies, and from inside the room we could hear Dane wage a battle of kind intentions.

"They are resting right now," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"Well, we came by to pray for them," one of the ladies said.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "But I feel pretty sure God can hear you out here in the hall."

We spent that Christmas season in the hospital. Friends came and decorated the room, and our two little girls curled up against Nicole in her hospital bed while she read " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas." We all tried to ignore the clear tube pumping feces up from her bowels and out her nose.

Dane had come to visit after Thanksgiving and never ended up returning home. He burned through his weeks of vacation time, visiting the hospital during the day and sleeping at our house each night.

The night after Christmas, our pug, Gracie, threw up something black and putrid on the floor at his feet. He put her in a basket with a blanket in his car and searched for an open animal clinic. When he found one, he explained our situation to the veterinarian, and after some testing she blurted, "I'm so sorry, but this dog has cancer and I think she's going to die. Actually, I know she is going to die." And then she burst into tears.

Dane called me. I sat in the blinking red and green lights of our hospital room, listened to the news, and offered, "Okay."

Gracie's death didn't move me. It annoyed me. She was forcing me to have a talk with my daughters that would link cancer and death, and I wasn't prepared yet.

Dane came to the hospital with a bottle of wine. We sat on the floor and drank amid the wrapping paper of the girls' Christmas presents.

"I think maybe I should just move in with you guys," he said. "Just to help out for a couple of months."

That meant leaving his job, his city, his friends, his apartment, his life.

"Okay," I said.

***

We readied ourselves for the physical horrors of death. Nicole seemed especially practical about it. She told us, "Just don't let me stink."

She shed weight, but we expected that. Dane and I could hardly see it, because we never left her. When visitors came, though, we could see it reflected in their faces, or when her shirt slipped to the side, exposing her collarbone. It looked wrong, like something alien implanted under her skin.

The most obvious manifestation of her illness, aside from weight loss, were the wounds. After each surgery, her skin was slower to heal, and finally a surgeon asked me if I knew about wound-packing.

"No," I said.

"You need to learn," he said.
Each night, Nicole would lie naked on the bed and, using tweezers, I would extract a piece of ribbon from the wounds in her abdomen, sometimes several feet long, which would uncoil in the air above her like a pus-covered tapeworm. Then I would repack new pieces of ribbon into the holes, folding them in, spiraling them inside her, while she wept and begged me to just skip it, please, this one time.

*Please, Matt. Please.*

Since we had met, when she was still a teenager, I had loved her with my whole self. Only now can I look back on the fullness of our affection; at the time I could see nothing but one wound at a time, a hole the size of a dime, into which I needed to pack a fistful of material. Love wasn't something I felt anymore. It was just something I did. When I finished, I would lie next to her and use sterile cotton balls to soak up her tears. When she finally slept, I would slip out of bed and go into our closet, the most isolated room in the house. Inside, I would wrap a blanket around my head, stuff it into my mouth, lie down and bury my head in a pile of dirty clothes, and scream.

Sometimes at night, Nicole would wake howling and sweating, with a twist in her bowels. I would call for Dane, waking him, and he would hold the back door open for me while I carried Nicole to the car. Then he would sit up with our girls until we came home. Sometimes hours later, sometimes weeks.

Eventually I started to notice something strange: little bits of half-digested food emerging from Nicole's wounds. I called her oncologist, who used a word I had never heard before: *fistulas.* When there's an infection or some other foreign thing in the body, the flesh works to eject it, forming tunnels to the surface. Her body no longer recognized food as useful and was now expelling it directly out the front of her abdomen, like a foreign substance.

Nicole tried to lift her head and look at her belly. "Does that smell like poop to you?"

"No, it's hard to . . ."

"Is there poop coming out my *front?* Tell me."

For months, we tried to catch it with everything from colostomy bags to special gauzes to cloth diapers, but the stomach acid
would burn through any adhesive and eventually started eating her flesh. There was no stopping it. There were only more narcotics for the pain.

These physical horrors, though, were nothing compared to what would come.

I told our family counselor, Julia, I knew things would get worse. "If I have to put her in a backpack and carry her to the chemo ward, I'll do it if it means getting an extra day with her."

Julia is a kind woman, but honest. "Before this is over," she said, "you will long for it to end."

Never, I said.

***

For months after Dane moved in, Nicole couldn't eat much, so I fed her intravenously. I had no medical training, but it didn't require a doctor; it just required someone sterile and awake.

It's difficult to appreciate the sterility of a hospital or lab until you try to impose it at home. In the early months of 2014, Dane and I cleaned ceaselessly—the house, the children, me, the medical equipment, Nicole herself. Boiling, wiping, filtering. But human bodies defy sterility, with our holes and our sloughing and our fingernails and our wet places.

The machine that pumped the fluid into her veins would shriek any time it needed attention—if a tube kinked, or she rolled over on it, or it ran out of fluid, or any number of other possibilities occurred—which happened every few minutes. During those months, Nicole was drugged and mostly unconscious, and I lay awake listening to the IV pump. I turned its amber display to face the wall, but that didn't help; I lay there doing the math, calculating how many milliliters of fluid remained until she needed more. In those months, I may never have slept an unbroken hour.

One day Dane touched my arm and I cried out, unsure of who he was. "You need sleep," he said.

He started conspiring against me, or so I suspected. From outside the bedroom door, I would overhear him talking with Nicole
about my exhausted mental state, which seemed absurd considering her condition. He started calling Julia, the counselor, behind
my back. And he was making some sort of secretive arrangements with my other friends.

One morning he sat down with me. "We are going away for a couple of days," he said. "You and me."

"What? No."

We would drive up to the foothills of the Appalachians and spend a couple days hiking. Another friend of Nicole's had agreed to
come sit with her, he said.

"No."

Julia felt it was for the best.

"No."

It wasn't for me, he said. It would make me a better caregiver for Nicole. "And for your girls," he said.

I conceded. We spent the next couple days in a national forest, walking endless trails, crossing streams, climbing rock formations,
mile after mile after mile. At the end of one trail, we found a waterfall and sat in the cool pool at its base, looking up at the
cataract pouring down. My body was useless; I could feel my equilibrium shifting left and right, as though I were still hiking. But
in my physical depletion, I discovered what Dane had known all along: My mind felt sharper and was more hopeful than it had
been in months.

After a few minutes, we noticed movement at the top of the waterfall. A half dozen college-aged women had climbed onto rocks
jutting from the top of the falls, and while we watched they started taking off their clothes. I blinked at Dane and we both burst
out laughing.

"Dude. What is happening?"

"Don't question this, Matt. You need this."

The girls started leaping from the rock into the deepest water at its base, and then climbing up and jumping again. They looked
like angels, perpetually falling to earth. They seemed impossibly joyful and healthy, and we could hear them laughing above the
sound of the water. Finally Dane said, "Let's do it!" and took off his shirt.

"I can't do that, man."

"Why?"

I had no answer and every answer. I was married. My wife was dying. I knew that every moment of enjoyment in this forest
would cost me later in guilt. And unlike Dane, I had not worked out in ages. No one wanted to see that. Instead I said, "We don't
know how deep the water is."

I watched Dane climb up and chat with the girls on their rocks, all hugging themselves against a cool wind. Nicole's illness had
cost Dane; at thirty-six, he had given up a management position and a girlfriend back in New Orleans. She could not grasp his
devotion to Nicole and me—it is ungraspable—and their relationship had come undone. From her perspective, he must have
seemed disloyal. He moved to the edge of the rocks to jump, and I found myself on my feet, clapping and cheering and wishing
the sun would stop setting, and these young women would never age or fall ill or die, and Dane could hang there in space for the
rest of time, a portrait of readiness and compassion.
Nicole rallied. She started eating again. She had slept through the months of IV feeding and woke up pleasantly surprised that she could now fit into smaller clothes than ever before. She started entertaining visitors. People would drop in to see her and she would sit up, beaming. Chatting. Apologizing for the state of her dress, or the house, or her hair, which had started growing back. She would describe all the things she wanted to do, and people—wonderful, kind, well-intentioned people—would nod and encourage her and marvel at her bravery.

This happened again and again throughout 2014. She would disappear into herself, silent, sleeping, afloat on powerful drugs, and then she would awaken with a new item to cross off her list: She wanted to visit New York one last time. She wanted to be the grand marshal of a Mardi Gras parade. She wanted to jump into the downtown fountain with all our friends. We did it all. What her life lacked in length, it made up for in height.

Each time she went down, doctors and nurses offered dire timelines. Months to live. Weeks. Even days. Each time, she rose again. It was magnificent to behold. It also came with a hidden price.

Each time Nicole faded, Dane took over many domestic duties—washing clothes, cleaning, shopping, cooking. I took over the rest. I woke and dressed and fed the girls, Molly and Evangeline, who were ten and seven. I helped them with their homework. I scheduled dosages, ordered supplies, checked the mail, paid the bills. I juggled money because nobody would die if we didn't pay our taxes, so the hospitals and surgeons came first.

During those times, Nicole was adrift on an opiate sea. We kept so much liquid morphine in the house that the doctors warned us about burglars. Then she graduated to Dilaudid, which is seven times stronger than morphine and ran on a continuous pump around the clock, alongside a terrifyingly powerful drug called fentanyl. These potions interrupted the signals between her mind and body, along with everything else in the physical world; her hallucinations disturbed Dane and me and would have terrified the girls. So we had to start keeping them away from her.

One night, she called to me and said she needed help to the bathroom. I tried to help her sit up, but she said, "No, I'm a Barbie doll. I can only move one limb at a time.” So I lifted her head and then her back, straightened her head, moved one leg off the
bed and then the other, finally standing her up. I moved her left foot, then her right foot, and so on until we had completed the
task. To this day, her lead nurse, a woman named Faith, saves a photo of one of Nicole's Dilaudid pumps, which she shows to
other nurses. That one pump recorded more than twenty thousand milligrams poured into Nicole. "That's more Dilaudid than I
and all the nurses I work with have ever given," she said. "Combined."

When she would emerge into one of her better periods, she would awaken, aghast at the way I was running the house. One
morning, she staggered into the kitchen, shocking us all, and announced that she planned to make eggs for the girls. Where had
I hidden the spatula? Why was there so little milk in the refrigerator? Was it spoiled? It didn't taste right. Nothing tasted right.
"How am I supposed to leave in peace?" she asked me. "I can't die like this."

With each decline and rise, she became more manic. One morning early last summer, I found her standing over the stove with
the gas wide open while she tried to teach Molly how to light it. She couldn't remember how. I moved to switch off the gas and
Nicole glared. She was unrecognizable with hatred.

Molly saw it and winced.

"It's not your fault, baby," Nicole told her, leading her away. "It's not your fault. Daddy needs to fix the stove."

There was nothing I could say. Her impending death stripped our relationship of every external measure of fairness. I could offer
no arguments; I could not say "That's dangerous" or "Please don't use the girls against me."

I could appeal to nothing, because nothing trumps dying.

***

Technology started to loom over our lives in a new way.

Dane continually found packages arriving on our front porch—packages of the most mundane items, like toilet paper or school
notebooks—and assumed I was ordering them. Then medical supplies started to arrive. And clothing. Food. We discovered that
Nicole was secretly ordering things online, clinging to her role as shopper.
"I am still a valid person," she seethed when I asked her about the packages. "I'm still part of this house."

I let it carry on a long time, in part because she couldn't keep track of her phone. She would call Dane and me to her bedside, enraged, to accuse us of stealing her phone as it sat on the pillow beside her head. Finally, when she tried to send money to someone in Iraq, I changed our accounts without telling her.

I found myself locked in a battle against a swelling horde of electronic opponents. When I discouraged Nicole from something—when I took away her car keys, or access to our accounts, or certain visiting hours—she would go to online cancer forums and write posts about my choices. Those forums are populated by people in similar awful situations who go online to hear yes in a world that is suddenly telling them no, and these people—this faceless mass of online handles—always told Nicole to keep fighting, that she could beat this, to just ignore my negativity.

Death is an invisible thing that can't be cursed at, or ignored, or denigrated. Each night, though, I lay down beside her, she would tear into me for hours, propelled by anger and fear and Dilaudid.

I started avoiding bedtime. I see now that, after fifteen years of marriage, this was my first step down a path that diverged from hers: hers toward death, mine toward a life afterward.

Dane and I stayed up late watching television every night. Without understanding why, we both became obsessed with zombie shows and movies. We spent every night—every night for an entire summer—watching the living dead shuffling eternally into frame just before being dispatched to the afterlife by some hero.

Afterward, we would sit in the dark for hours, sometimes in silence, but usually discussing the day's interactions with Nicole. I confessed to him one night that a dark fantasy had flickered through my mind earlier involving a spoon and mayonnaise.

He laughed. Nothing tasted right to Nicole anymore except mayonnaise. She ate so much of it that when Dane and I went to the grocery store, we would buy two jars at a time. She had a jar-a-day habit. On this particular day, she had asked me to make her a turkey sandwich, which I did and then brought into the bedroom. She took one bite and handed it back.

"Less turkey, more mayo," she said.

I remade it, spooning on double the mayonnaise.
"No," she said again, disgusted. "More mayo."

I heaped the stuff on this time. Great mounds of it.

When I handed it to her, she shook her head. "So you're trying to starve me," she said. "I guess I'm not dying fast enough."

Since the day of her diagnosis, everything in my life had revolved around this frail figure before me. Decisions and depression. Hopes and heartbreak. And now, for a sliver of a second, I pictured myself prying open her mouth and pouring a whole jar of mayonnaise down her throat.

When visitors came, Nicole could draw herself up and present a model of grace and fearlessness—the same for online forums and Facebook. Those sentiments were true—she carried herself with courage, and love, and poise—but when we were alone, she cut me without mercy.

In just a few words, Dane saved me.

He said, "She lashes out at you because she knows you'll stay."

And when I would deny her yet another delirious fantasy—of going someplace exotic when the bathroom would forevermore be the extent of her travels—he had a simple clarity that I assumed I had lost for good.

"Just tell her yes," he said.

***

A sort of delirium set in.

Dane had lived with us for almost a year now, lived in the shadow of death, and he and I found ourselves cracking jokes so dark, so morbid, that they defied explanation.

We made a pact: If he married someday or if I remarried and one of our wives was diagnosed with cancer, the other would show
up at the hospital and slip a knife between his ribs. A mercy killing. We cried laughing, imagining the puzzlement of witnesses on
the scene: "This guy just walked in and stabbed him. And what's really weird? The dead guy told him 'thank you.'"

We told stories about how we would both be old men, drooling and incontinent, and Nicole would shuffle in to demand a
mayonnaise sandwich.

We laughed at our inept drug smuggling. I had heard weed could help counter the nausea from chemo, but medical marijuana
is illegal in Alabama. So some friends offered to get us some. I told them to just leave it in their mailbox, where I could pick it
up. "Just make sure to pick it up before noon," my friend said. "That's when the mailman comes." The next morning, I found the
brick of weed in the right spot, wrapped in clear plastic, and on top of it, the day's mail.

Later, when we had to take away Nicole's phone—probably the most difficult decision of the entire ordeal—she started leaving us
venomous, drug-addled handwritten notes. They were heartbreaking. But her creativity and determination in delivering them
took on an artistry. We couldn't figure out how she was doing it.

"I got this on my pillow," Dane said one night. A crayon scrawl.

I showed him mine, a loopy screed about needing her phone. "I found it in the bathroom," I told him, "stuck on the wall opposite
the toilet, at eye level when sitting."

In our heartache and exhaustion, we both started to giggle. "You know what she's doing, right?" Dane said.

"What?"

"She's texting us."

It got to where I started hiding from Nicole, unable to face the rage. Too cowardly to sit and bear it, I would curl in the fetal
position on our porch swing, where she could not find me. Or I would retreat to one of the girls' bedrooms upstairs, where she
could not follow. I stopped eating and drinking.
Dane appeared there one night with a plate of food and a bottle of water. He admonished me with profound compassion. "I'm going to let you stay like this for one more day," he said. "After that, you'll have to get up."

As he walked out the door, he stopped to complete his argument. "For your girls," he said.

Even in my spiral I could see that our daughters had fallen in love with Dane. They sensed in him a strength that I no longer had, and they confided in him.

Each night, he would sit alone on our porch after Nicole and I went to bed. He would read, or call his friends back in New Orleans, or count raccoons crossing under a streetlight. A few times Molly got up and went out to join him.

I watched them through a window. He would sit with her, rocking on the swing, and listen while she talked about bad dreams.

***

The dressing on Nicole's abdomen became a massive, complex thing that required specialist nurses to come in every couple days and assemble it as a team. Its purpose now was to keep her abdomen from coming apart altogether.

One day, immediately after the nurses left, Nicole started pulling apart the bandages. "I think I'd like to have myself a shower," she said.

I watched, speechless, as she pulled off the last of the gauze and made her way to the shower, dribbling stool and acid onto the floor as she walked. I just lay on the bed, unable to move.

A long while later she returned and lay beside me. She requested tape and gauze.

"Let me call the nurses," I said.

"No. I can do this myself."

As she unwound the tape, it stuck to her hands, to itself, to her belly. Her stomach belched up a geyser of yellow crap, which flowed down her sides onto the bed. Her hands stopped, and I looked up to her face. She had passed out.

I touched her cheek and her eyes fluttered open. She smiled. She seemed puzzled to find herself covered in hot excrement and tried with her bare hands to contain it. It smeared all over her torso, up her arms to her elbows, and all over the bed. I reached to help and she pushed me away.

Something in me broke. The remaining thread of the last fiber of the final cable holding me together just snapped, and I rolled off the bed. I didn't want her to see. I crawled into the bathroom and curled around the base of the toilet, shaking and weeping.

From the bedroom, I heard her call out, "Dane..." Her voice was diaphanous, like she was calling through silk. I heard Dane come to the door, and she told him I needed help. She had called him for me.

Dane opened the bathroom door and I cried out, "It's just shit everywhere, Dane." With vast discretion, he didn't try to pick me up from the floor this time. He just closed the door.

The nurses came and replaced Nicole's dressing. I don't remember how long I lay in the bathroom, but the light through the windows had shifted when I emerged.
Later, Nicole's lead nurse, Faith, sat down with me. "I see it now," she said. "She needs antipsychotics."

***

**Haldol was designed** as an antischizophrenic drug in the 1950s, at the peak of the mental-institution boom in America. It's a knockout drug. "Hound dog," the nurses called it.

According to Alabama law, licensed practical nurses, who were now staying at the house and watching Nicole around the clock, were not allowed to administer it. Registered nurses could, but they could come by only once a day.

There was a loophole in the law, though, they said: Someone else could administer it.

Me.

So while the nurses watched and advised me, I started giving my wife the injections that would, in a sense, finish her life. She drifted away on Haldol, an ocean measured in milliliters, no longer calling for food or water, which meant the volcano of her stomach stopped erupting. Her face relaxed. Her jaw drooped.

Her breathing slowed, and over the next few days it grew louder—loud enough to hear throughout the house. It sounded like someone slowly dragging a cello bow across her vocal cords. I realized then that the last honest person to describe death may be whoever came up with "croaking."

The way dying looks, or so I expected, was like this: A small group of friends and family gather around the patient, watching as she draws and releases her final breath. People hold hands and exchange glances to acknowledge how profound the moment is just before a doctor checks for a pulse and announces, "It's done."

The way it actually happened was like this: There was medical equipment blocking the way to our bathroom, so on the morning of September 9, 2014, I went upstairs to shower. I had a head full of shampoo when I heard Dane call from the foot of the stairs. I couldn't make out what he said, so I rinsed off and stepped out of the shower. A few seconds later, as I tried to towel off, he called again: "Hurry."
I tried to pull jeans onto my wet legs as I stumbled down the stairs, and just before I made it to the bedroom I heard Nicole's rasping breath. I think I did, at least; I was trying to zip up my pants before entering the room, where Dane stood with two nurses. They stood looking at Nicole.

"What happened?" I said.

"That may have been the last one," Faith said. "Maybe. They're coming slow."

Nicole's pulse had faded days ago, to the point where no one could feel it. So we stood watching her for a couple minutes. She simply didn't breathe again. No spiritual release. No change in complexion. No shift in facial features. She just stopped.

It was a routine death in every sense. It was ordinary. Common. The only remarkable element was Dane. I had married into this situation, but how had he gotten here? Love is not a big-enough word. He stood and faced the reality of death for my sake. He is my friend.

***

The months after Nicole died stretched and shrank and stretched again, like taffy.

Grief hollowed me out, and I expected that. But underneath it I also felt a deep sense of relief, and even joy. For the first time in two years, I felt hope. I kept that a secret, though. People would stop me on the street to express their sorrow, and I would find myself stooping to match their emotional tone. "Oh, yes, it is so difficult, but we will make it somehow."

The truth was that, after two years of suffering, Nicole finally felt no more pain. After two years of horror, the girls and I felt like we had escaped something. Molly told me that, for the first time in as long as she could remember, she didn't dread hearing me call from the foot of the stairs, because she knew I had no more bad news to deliver.

Dane helped the girls adjust to an endless life without their mother, but the days without Nicole were empty, and he wanted to find work. I told him there was no need. He could just live with us, and I would split my income with him. Forever if he wanted. We had survived an endless winter and entered into an existential springtime.
But Dane quietly descended into a depression of his own. He felt restless and started spending more time in his room. At one point, he visited a pet shop with a friend, and she alternated between picking up the puppies and kittens. "Don't you want to hold one?" she asked him.

"Nah," he said. He couldn't explain it, but he knew that if he held a small animal he would burst into tears.

In January of this year, four months after Nicole died, fourteen months after he abruptly left behind every single thing that makes up an adult life to put himself at the service of Nicole and me, he decided that he needed to move back to New Orleans and reclaim his own life.

In a most unexpected way, Dane's leaving hit me harder than Nicole's because I wasn't prepared for it. He didn't know how to tell me that he was leaving, so he just started packing up. He left one day when the girls were at school. On that day, he stopped as he climbed into his car. "I'll be back in a couple of weeks," he said. "It'll be weird, though, because you'll be married by then."

We both laughed. He pulled out of the driveway, and I just stood there in the yard for a long time, wondering what to do, my eyes all wet. Then, after a while, I turned and went back inside my empty house.

—

Published in the May 2015 issue.