

“My Sick Husband Got



HER TURN:

“Marrying Nate three years ago was a huge mistake,” said Abby, 32, a first-grade teacher in a Minneapolis suburb. “I should have listened to my head, not my heart. About six months after he and I started dating, we decided we needed a break from each other to think things over. During this month apart I made up my mind to split up with him. I realized that I’d gotten together with Nate out of pity. That’s because on our third date he told me he’d been diagnosed with leukemia two years earlier and had undergone radiation, chemo, hair loss, the whole bit. The disease was in remission by then but could easily recur. Somehow, knowing Nate could die gave our romance an incredible urgency.”

“But that didn’t stop us from fighting all the time. Basically, we’re just really different. I’m from a huge, close-knit family, while Nate’s the only child of divorced parents. His dad, whom he hasn’t seen

for years, was an angry alcoholic who criticized everything Nate did. Maybe that’s why Nate yells so much. I was taken aback when he started mouthing off at family functions, even at my extended family’s annual Labor Day picnic. Thinking about that during our break, I decided that Nate had no clue how to be a good husband or father, and I couldn’t marry a guy like that. Then there was the other stuff I didn’t like: the fact that he was a workaholic and that when he wasn’t working he was always ‘out with the guys.’

“Anyway, I was prepared to tell Nate it was over, but I never got the chance. The day before our trial separation was set to end, he called me from the hospital with devastating news: His cancer had returned and was very advanced. The doctors didn’t even want him to drive home. I started crying and went right over to pick him up.

BETTER—AND OUR MARRIAGE GOT *Worse*”



(His fertility was already low from the chemo, and the stem-cell transplant could leave him totally sterile.) Meanwhile, my mother and I bought flowers, food and a dress for the wedding. My whole family was terrific. I remember Mom saying that it would be good for Nate to be one of us since he was pretty much alone in the world.

“We got married the next day, Wednesday, by a justice of the peace, and had a little reception afterward at my parents’ house. On Thursday Nate went to the hospital.

“This was in May. As a teacher, I was off for the summer, and I threw myself into nursing Nate. Even though it was touch-and-go for months, this was one of the happiest times of my life. I felt so needed and so loved—the way I had felt growing

“When we got back to his house, we sat in the kitchen trying to make sense of it all. He told me he’d planned to propose. He said he’d missed me terribly and would do anything to make our relationship work. I felt so horribly sorry for him, with his life hanging in the balance, that I blurted out that we should get married. And I meant it. He’d need someone to care for him after he got the last-resort treatment for his disease, a complicated procedure involving a stem-cell transplant that, if successful, would boost his immune system and help him beat the cancer. The odds were not good, but I thought they’d be better if I could give him a reason to live. In the face of all this, my gripes seemed puny.

“Nate got teary and said I was the only woman for him and that he’d try harder to get along with my family and tone down his temper. The next day, Tuesday, he went to a clinic to freeze some sperm.

up. As the oldest child, I was a ‘little mother’ to my six siblings, and I relished the role. I fell right back into it during Nate’s convalescence. We never fought and Nate got to know my family much better because they were in and out all the time.

“Nate responded extremely well to the procedure, and the prognosis for his long-term survival is excellent. But once he recovered from his surgery, he reverted to his old ways! He started putting down my family, yelling for no reason, holing up with work and leaving me alone while he played softball or golf with his buddies. And heaven forbid I should call him on his cell while he’s out. He gets really curt and tells me not to bother him. Honestly, I might as well be single. We barely even have sex anymore.

“But the last straw was the day my father and brother were helping Nate patch our roof. My brother was on a ladder and accidentally **CONTINUED**

dropped a tool that landed near where Nate was standing. Nate went ballistic, screaming, ‘Get that clown out of here—I’ll do the job myself!’ I was mortified. My dad and brother left, and I expected Nate to apologize. Instead he went on a rant about how my family controls me. I was so upset, all I could do was sob. He just shrugged and turned on the TV.

“I should have known from his upbringing that Nate was damaged goods. I need someone who’ll treat me and my family right—and clearly Nate is not that someone.”

HIS TURN: “Abby is hopelessly tied to her mother’s apron strings,” said Nate, 34, an accountant. “She insists I’m screwed up because I come from a broken home and my father is an alcoholic, but she’s the one with family issues. She asks her mom’s advice on the most trivial matters, and her brothers and sisters feel free to drop in unannounced. It drives me insane!

“Abby was fantastic about nursing me back to health, but that’s not a normal situation. I’m better now, and I want to develop a deeper relationship with my wife. Instead, I’m desperate to get out of the house just to avoid dealing with her family.

One brother in particular really bugs me. I’m sure Abby mentioned the roof incident. To say this guy is not a handyman is the understatement of the century. He’s the last person I wanted up on that ladder. Sure enough, he lost his grip on a hammer and it missed my head by inches. Yes, I went nuts and yelled at him, but Abby should never have asked for his help in the first place. And yes, I bring

work home, and I like playing on the office softball team or golfing with my friends. Abby really hates that—she drives me crazy by calling almost every hour to ask when I’m coming home. But if she really wanted me to stay home with her, she’d talk

Keeping Family in Its Place

“Many couples underestimate the powerful influence their families will have on their marriage,” says counselor Betsy Sansby. Here, Sansby’s four tips for establishing reasonable, healthy boundaries:

1 Decide as a couple how much time you can reasonably spend with various family members and stick with the plan.

2 If a family member behaves badly toward your spouse, it’s your job to step in.

3 Look for opportunities to include both sides of the family in activities that everyone will enjoy.

4 If certain family members are toxic to be with, plan activities that are time-limited. However, always show respect. —Lisa Gerry

to her family about letting us live our own lives.

“I fell in love with Abby almost from the moment I met her. She’s pretty and smart, and I get a kick out of hearing her talk about her students. She’s a phenomenal teacher. It’s that same giving streak that made her such a wonderful nurse when I was recovering from the surgery. I honestly feel I owe my life to her. At the same time, her very niceness may be why she can’t say no to her family.

“I know I have a short temper and sincerely want to learn to control it. If I can figure that out, maybe Abby can figure out how to ease up with her family. I’ve had a second chance at life, and those frozen sperm are waiting. They may not be good enough to get Abby pregnant, but I can’t help fantasizing not only about surviving my cancer but also about becoming a father one day. There’s no one else on earth I’d want as the mother of my child. I adore Abby and desperately want to make a go of our marriage.”

THE COUNSELOR’S TURN:

“It was immediately clear that once Nate got back on his feet, Abby felt lost without her caretaker role,” said the counselor. “It had come naturally. She’d loved helping with her younger siblings, an experience that steered her toward teaching. While he was sick and dependent on her, Nate was child-like, so she was in her element. But as Nate correctly pointed out, nurse-patient is not a healthy model for a long-term relationship between equals.

“Additionally, Abby’s strong bonds with her large family were a stark contrast to Nate’s experience as an only child in a dysfunctional family. He’d learned early to fend for himself and **CONTINUED on page 81**

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was uncomfortable with big get-togethers and constant family contact. I decided to talk with Abby privately to find out whether she cared enough about Nate to compromise on this issue. Nate had been unequivocal in professing his love for Abby, but I'd heard no similar expressions from her. She'd said only that she liked feeling needed by him.

"Abby thought back to when she and Nate were first dating and he wasn't yet included in family functions. They'd gone out by themselves and had a fabulous time. 'I was crazy about him,' Abby said. 'He was so romantic, bringing me flowers and little gifts. And he never yelled. That started when my family came into the picture. Maybe if I cut back on family stuff, he'll calm down.'

"That's a strong possibility,' I told her. But the couple also needed to learn how to handle conflict more effectively. I taught them my four-step STOP strategy: Stop—halt the conversation when you start to get uncomfortable with the way it is going. Time-out—physically separate for 30 to 60 minutes in order to calm down. Own your part—take responsibility for your role in creating the problem instead of attacking your partner or defending your position. Peace offering—after you come back together and talk about what you each learned in your time apart, seal the deal with a kiss or a promise to change a behavior.

Before long Abby and Nate got very good at communicating—so much so that they reached a mutually satisfying agreement on the family question. They would visit her parents every other Sunday and would host



Thanksgiving and Christmas at their home. Abby also told her family that they should call before coming over, and that if the timing wasn't right she could say no without anyone's feelings getting hurt. It took a while for her family to get used to this arrangement, but eventually they came around. As Nate's angry outbursts subsided, the couple's dormant sex life revived. And as they drew closer, his insistence on working at home eased, as did his desire to escape with his pals.

"Several months into counseling, Abby and Nate came in with wonderful news. After just one attempt at in vitro fertilization, Abby had become pregnant. 'The doctor couldn't believe it, since he doubted Nate's sperm were viable enough and many women need several tries,' she said. 'But I come from a fertile line—my mom always said she got pregnant if my dad just looked at her!'

"'I'll be the happiest man on earth when this baby is born,' Nate said, showing me a picture of the sonogram. 'To think I was at death's door and now I'm going to be a father!'

"Nate promised to call when the baby was born. My phone rang at 8 A.M. one spring morning. 'Everything went great,' Nate said through tears. 'And our son is perfect.'

"Two years later Abby called with more news. 'We're going to try for a second child,' she said, laughing and crying simultaneously. 'We might get lucky again. But even if we don't, we have Nathaniel Edward, Jr., and that makes us incredibly happy. I can't believe I ever thought about leaving Nate.' ■



This month's case is based on the files of Betsy Sansby, M.S., a counselor in private practice in Minnetonka, Minnesota (www.talkaboutrelationships.net).

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