

It's hard to think of stories to tell about Nicole. Rather than wild, youthful escapades, most of the time I shared with her was spent doing totally mundane things: cooking, cleaning, laundry, errands. Still, somehow I look back on these ordinary moments fondly because I was experiencing them *with my friend*. She made everything so much more fun than it should have been.

For several years, we were neighbors, and so she was over for dinner at our place at least twice a week. She would come over after I got off work. We'd sit and talk over coffee (*café time*, we called it). Then, she'd talk to me and critique my recipes while I made dinner or vent to me about work while we both worked on our busy-hobbies (her knitting, my quilting or drawing up future garden plans).

When James, my husband, would go away on long business trips, she and I would plan massive kitchen projects together. We made practically a freezer full of raviolis, one fall. One summer, we made three different kinds of ice cream and vowed to eat it all before James came home just to teach him a lesson.

Nicole could tell a story that would last through an entire double-loader washer cycle, through 75-cents of drying time, and long after the laundry had been folded. She had this way of dodging the resolution of a story. When she'd start talking, you could see the end of the story off in the distance, and ~ just as she'd come close to reeling it in ~ she'd launch into a litany about some benign detail... and the story would keep spinning out like yarn.

Though I remember urging her to get to the point sometimes when I was in a hurry, I always knew her way of expressing herself was just proof of the unique way she saw the world. She was gifted in so many ways even though she didn't accept compliments very easily. She was glaringly optimistic and pessimistic at the same time. She never once felt hopeless even though she could complain as well as any of us (and in astounding detail). But no matter what the circumstances were, she was never content to wallow in sorrow for long.

Nicole came into my life at a time when I'd lost touch with several close friends. My husband can attest: I wasn't sure I was ready to have a new friend so soon. But I needn't have worried. She quickly became the most reliable friend I've ever had. I was never lonely when she was around. I'm an introvert. If I needed to go do something scary and didn't want to be by myself, I knew she'd come with me. We knew what the other was thinking before we could even say it, and we knew we could trust one another with advice, with life and death ~ anything.

There's now not a single room in our house that doesn't hold some memory of Nicole — something she always recommended and introduced us to, something she gave to us, something from our old apartment in Evanston that she held in her hands. My memories of

her are so vivid, I find myself looking for photos that don't actually exist. She hated being photographed, but I have so many photos that I will always know she's there just outside the margin of.

Once James and I moved away in 2011, we still thought of her every day – *Boy, you know what Nicole would say about that!, Remember the time she?, I wonder if she still?...* She came up to visit us a few times. Each time she left, we'd make a list of things to do next time. Now somehow we have to acknowledge that she's moved on.

I feel lucky to have known her, but cheated that she's gone. We had so many plans – things James and I wanted to show her, new places we wanted to take her, restaurants we knew she'd like, friends we wanted her to meet. Now none of it is to be. It's hard not to feel regret that we both let mere miles separate us, forgetting we are never promised time.

But, I don't believe that people suddenly become past tense when they pass away. I believe our souls move on to an eternal place where we are suddenly filled with knowledge of absolutely everything, and we are finally totally at peace. All the torment of traumatic memories, misunderstandings, strife, pain, separation – these are all instantly washed away – no memory, no scars remain.

I also believe that when we get to that place, we won't feel homesick or lonely because it's eternity: there's no beginning or end, all our loved ones are already there with us. But, for those of us still in this realm – wringing our hands, wiping our tears, grieving this separation – I believe there's a presence that remains from our loved ones who have passed on. It's not a ghostly presence, more like a constant companion. These companions are like shotgun riders, journeying along with us in our remaining road trip through life.

The pain of Nicole's passing will gradually be replaced by the reassuring comfort that she's still here ~ always riding shotgun everywhere I go in life. I can eventually take comfort in knowing she's now free of the stresses, pains, and uncertainties of this existence. And I know that ~ through our memories and in her presence that remains, I will continue to learn from my amazing friend and cherish the love that we still possess.