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Beautiful Boy

David Sheff

introduction

It hurts so bad that I cannot save him, protect him, keep him out of harm's way, shield him from pain. What good are fathers if not for these things?

-- Thomas Lynch, "The Way We Are"

"Howdy Pop, God, I miss you guys so much. I can't wait to see you all. Only one more day!!! Woo-hoo."

Nic is emailing from college on the evening before he arrives home for summer vacation. Jasper and Daisy, our eight- and five- year-olds, are sitting at the kitchen table cutting, pasting, and coloring notes and welcome-home banners for his homecoming. They have not seen their big brother in six months.

In the morning, when it's time to leave for the airport, I go outside to round them up. Daisy, wet and muddy, is perched on a branch high up in a maple tree. Jasper stands below her. "You give me that back or else!" he warns.

"No," she responds. "It's mine." There is bold defiance in her eyes, but then, when he starts to climb up the tree, she throws down the Gandalf doll he's after.

"It's time to go get Nic," I say, and they dash past me into the house, chanting, "Nicky Nicky Nicky."

We drive the hour and a half to the airport. When we reach the terminal, Jasper yells, "There's Nic." He points. "There!"

Nic, an army green duVel bag slung over his shoulder, leans against a no parking sign on the curb outside United baggage claim. Lanky thin in a faded red T-shirt and

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his girlfriend's cardigan, sagging jeans that ride below his bony hips, and red Converse All-Stars, when he sees us, his face brightens and he waves.

The kids both want to sit next to him and so, after throwing his bags into the way back, he climbs over Jasper and buckles in between them. In turn he clasps each of their heads between the palms of his hands and kisses their cheeks. "It's so good to see you," he says. "I missed you little boinkers. Like crazy." To us up front, he adds, "You, too, Pops and Mama."

As I drive away from the airport, Nic describes his flight. "It was the worst," he says. "I was stuck next to a lady who wouldn't stop talking. She had platinum hair with peaks like on lemon meringue pie. Cruella De Vil horn-rimmed eyeglasses and prune lips and thick pink face powder."

"Cruella De Vil?" Jasper asks. He is wide-eyed.

Nic nods. "Just like her. Her eyelashes were long and false -- purple, and she wore this perfume: Eau de Stinky." He holds his nose. "Yech." The kids are rapt.

We drive across the Golden Gate Bridge. A river of thick fog pours below us and wraps around the Marin Headlands. Jasper asks, "Nic, are you coming to Step- Up?" referring to his and Daisy's upcoming graduation celebration. The kids are stepping up from second grade to third and kindergarten to first grade.

"Wouldn't miss it for all the tea in China," Nic responds.

Daisy asks, "Nic, do you remember that girl Daniela? She fell oV the climbing structure and broke her toe."

"Ouch."

"She has a cast," Jasper adds.

"A cast on her toe?" Nic asks. "It must be teeny."

Jasper gravely reports, "They will cut it off with a hacksaw."

"Her toe?"

They all giggle.

After a while, Nic tells them, "I have something for you kiddos. In my suitcase."

"Presents!"

"When we get home," he responds.

They beg him to tell them what, but he shakes his head. "No way, José. It's a surprise."

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I can see the three of them in the rearview mirror. Jasper and Daisy have smooth olive complexions. Nic's was, too, but now it's gaunt and rice-papery. Their eyes are brown and clear, whereas his are dark globes. Their hair is dark brown, but Nic's, long and blond when he was a child, is faded like a field in late summer with smashed-down sienna patches and sticking-up yellowed clumps -- a result of his unfortu-nate attempt to bleach it with Clorox.

"Nic, will you tell us a P. J. story?" Jasper begs. For years Nic has entertained the kids with The Adventures of P. J. Fumblebumble, a British detective of his invention.

"Later, mister, I promise."

We head north on the freeway, exiting and turning west, meandering through a series of small towns, a wooded state park, and then hilly pastureland. We stop in Point Reyes Station to retrieve the mail. It's impossible to be in town without running into a dozen friends, all of whom are pleased to see Nic, bombarding him with questions about school and his summer plans. Finally we drive off and follow the road along Papermill Creek to our left turn, where I head up the hill and pull into our driveway.

"We have a surprise, too, Nicky," says Daisy.

Jasper looks sternly at her. "Don't you tell him!"

"It's signs. We made them."

"Dai-sy..."

Lugging his bags, Nic follows the kids into the house. The dogs charge him, barking and howling. At the top of the stairs, Nic is greeted by the kids' banners and drawings, including a hedgehog, captioned, "I miss Nic, boo hoo," drawn by Jasper. Nic praises their artistry and then trudges into his bedroom to unpack. Since he left for college, his room, a Pompeian red chamber at the far end of the house, has become an adjunct playroom with a display of Jasper's Lego creations, including a maharaja's castle and motorized R2-D2. Preparing for his return, Karen cleared off Daisy's menagerie of stuffed animals and made up the bed with a comforter and fresh pillows.

When Nic emerges, his arms are loaded with gifts. For Daisy, there are Josefina and Kirsten, American Girl dolls, hand-me-downs from his girlfriend. They are prettily dressed in, respectively, an embroidered peasant blouse and serape and a green velvet jumper. Jasper gets a pair of cannon-sized Super Soakers.

"After dinner," Nic warns Jasper, "you will be so wet that you will have to swim back into the house."

"You'll be so wet you'll need a boat."

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"You'll be wetter than a wet noodle."

"You'll be so wet that you won't need a shower for a year."

Nic laughs. "That's fine with me," he says. "It'll save me a lot of time."

We eat and then the boys fill up the squirt guns and hasten outside into the windy evening, running in opposite directions. Karen and I watch from the living room. Stalking each other, the boys lurk among the Italian cypress and oaks, duck under garden furniture, and creep behind hedges. When there's a clean shot, they squirt each other with thin streams of water. Hidden behind some potted hydrangeas, Daisy watches from near the house. When the boys race past her, she twirls a spigot she's grasping with one hand and takes aim with a garden hose she's holding in the other. She drenches them.

I stop the boys just as they're about to catch her. "You don't deserve to be rescued," I tell her, "but it's bedtime."

Jasper and Daisy take baths and put on their pajamas and then ask Nic to read to them.

He sits on a miniature couch between their twin beds, his long legs stretched out on the floor. He reads from The Witches, by Roald Dahl. We hear his voice -- voices -- from the next room: the boy narrator, all wonder and earnestness; wry and creaky Grandma; and the shrieking, haggy Grand High Witch.

"Children are foul and filthy!...Children are dirty and stinky!...Children are smelling of dogs' drrrroppings!...They are vurse than dogs' drrroppings! Dogs' drrroppings is smelling like violets and prrrimroses compared with children!"

Nic's performance is irresistible, and the children, as always, are riveted by him.

At midnight, the storm that has been building finally hits. There's a hard rain, and intermittent volleys of hailstones pelt down like machine-gun fire on the copper roof tiles. We rarely have electrical storms, but tonight the sky lights up like popping flashbulbs.

Between thunderclaps, I hear the creaking of tree branches. I also hear Nic padding along the hallway, making tea in the kitchen, quietly strumming his guitar and playing Björk, Bollywood soundtracks, and Tom Waits, who sings his sensible advice: "Never drive a car when you're dead." I worry about Nic's insomnia but push away my suspicions, reminding myself how far he has come since the previous school year, when he dropped out of Berkeley. This time, he went east to college and completed his freshman year. Given what we have been through, this feels miraculous. By my count, he is coming up on his one hundred and fiftieth day without methamphetamine.

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In the morning the storm has passed, and the sun shimmers on the wet maple leaves. I dress and join Karen and the little kids in the kitchen. Nic, wearing flannel pajama bottoms, a fraying wool sweater, and x-ray specs, shuffles in. He hovers over the kitchen counter, fussing with the espresso maker, filling it with water and coffee and setting it on a flame, and then sits down to a bowl of cereal with Jasper and Daisy.

"Daisy," he says. "Your hose attack was brilliant, but I'm going to have to repay you for it. Watch your back."

She cranes her neck. "I can't see it."

Nic says, "I love you, you wacko."

Soon after Daisy and Jasper leave for school, a half-dozen women arrive to help Karen make a going-away gift for a beloved teacher. They bejewel a concrete birdbath with seashells, polished stones, and handmade (by students) tiles. As they work, they chat and sip tea.

I hide in my oYce.

The women are taking a lunch break in the open kitchen. One of the mothers has brought Chinese chicken salad. Nic, who had gone back to sleep, emerges from his bedroom, shaking off his grogginess and greeting the women. He politely answers their questions -- once again, about college and his summer plans -- and then excuses himself, saying that he's off to a job interview.

After he leaves, I hear the mothers talking about him.

"What a lovely boy."

"He's delightful."

One comments on his good manners. "You're very lucky," she tells Karen. "Our teenage son sort of grunts. Otherwise he never gives us the time of day."

In a couple hours, Nic returns to a quiet house -- the mosaicing mothers have gone home. He got the job. Tomorrow he goes in for training as a waiter at an Italian restaurant. Though he is aghast at the required uniform, including stiff black shoes and a burgundy vest, he was told that he will make piles of money in tips.

The following afternoon, after the training session, Nic practices on us, drawing his character from the waiter in one of his memorized videos, Lady and the Tramp. We are sitting down for dinner. With one hand aloft, balancing an imaginary tray, he enters, singing in a lilting Italian accent, "Oh, this is the night, it's a beautiful night, and we call it bella notte."

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After dinner, Nic asks if he can borrow the car to go to an AA meeting. After missed curfews and as-sorted other infractions, including banging up both of our cars (efficiently doing it in one accident, driving one into the other), by last summer he had lost driving privileges, but this request seems reasonable -- AA meetings are an essential component of his continued recovery -- and so we agree. He heads out in the station wagon, still dented from the earlier mishap. Then he dutifully returns home after the meeting, telling us that he asked someone he met to be his sponsor while he's in town.

The next day he requests the car again, this time so that he can meet the sponsor for lunch. Of course I let him. I am impressed by his assiduousness and his adherence to the rules we have set down. He lets us know where he's going and when he will be home. He arrives when he promises he will. Once again, he is gone for a brief couple hours.

The following late afternoon a fire burns in the living room. Sitting on the twin couches, Karen, Nic, and I read while nearby, on the faded rug, Jasper and Daisy play with Lego people. Looking up from a gnome, Daisy tells Nic about a "meany potatohead" boy who pushed her friend Alana. Nic says that he will come to school and make him a "mashed meany potatohead."

I am surprised to hear Nic quietly snoring a while later, but at a quarter to seven, he awakens with a start. Checking his watch, he jumps up and says, "I almost missed the meeting," and once again asks if he can borrow the car.

I am pleased that though he is exhausted and would have been content to sleep for the night, he is committed to the work of recovery, committed enough to rouse himself, splash his face with water in the bathroom sink, brush his hair out of his eyes with his fingers, throw on a clean T-shirt, and race out of the house so that he will be on time.

It's after eleven and Nic isn't home. I had been so tired, but now I'm wide awake in bed, feeling more and more uneasy. There are a million harmless explanations. Oftentimes, groups of people at AA meetings go out afterward for coffee. Or he could be talking with his new sponsor. I contend with two simultaneous, opposing monologues, one reassuring me that I'm foolish and paranoid, the other certain that something is dreadfully wrong. By now I know that worry is useless, but it shoots in and takes over my body at the touch of a hair trigger. I don't want to assume the worst, but some of the times Nic ignored his curfew, it presaged disaster.

I stare into the dark, my anxiety mounting. It is a pathetically familiar state. I have been waiting for Nic for years. At night, past his curfew, I would wait for the car's grinding engine, when it pulled into the driveway and then went silent. At last -- Nic. The shutting car door, footsteps, the front door opening with a click. Despite Nic's attempt at stealth, Brutus, the chocolate Lab, usually yelped a half-hearted

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bark. Or I would wait for the telephone to ring, never certain if it would be him ("Hey, Pop, how're ya doin'?") or the police ("Mr. Sheff, we have your son"). Whenever he was late or failed to call, I assumed catastrophe. He was dead. Always dead.

But then Nic would arrive home, creeping up the hallway stairs, his hand sliding along the banister. Or the telephone would ring. "Sorry, Pop, I'm at Richard's house. I fell asleep. I think I'll just crash here rather than drive at this hour. I'll see you in the morning. I love you." I would be furious and relieved, both, because I had already buried him.

Late this night, with no sign of him, I finally fall into a miserable half- sleep. Just after one, Karen wakes me. She hears him sneaking in. A garden light, equipped with a motion detector, flashes on, casting its white light across the backyard. Clad in my pajamas, I slip on a pair of shoes and go out the back door to catch him.

The night air is chilly. I hear crunching brush.

I turn the corner and come head-to-head with an enormous startled buck, who quickly lopes away up into the garden, effortlessly leaping over the deer fence.

Back in bed, Karen and I are wide awake.

It's one-thirty. Now two. I double check his room.

It is two-thirty.

Finally, the sound of the car.

I confront Nic in the kitchen and he mumbles an excuse. I tell him that he can no longer use the car.

"Whatever."

"Are you high? Tell me."

"Jesus. No."

"Nic, we had an agreement. Where were you?"

"What the fuck?" He looks down. "A bunch of people at the meeting went back to a girl's house to talk and then we watched a video."

"There was no phone?"

"I know," he says, his anger flaring. "I said I'm sorry."

I snap back, "We'll talk about this in the morning," as he escapes into his room, shutting his door and locking it.

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At breakfast, I stare hard at Nic. The giveaway is his body, vibrating like an idling car. His jaw gyrates and his eyes are darting opals. He makes plans with Jasper and Daisy for after school and gives them gentle hugs, but his voice has a prickly edge.

When Karen and the kids are gone, I say, "Nic, we have to talk."

He eyes me warily. "About?"

"I know you're using again. I can tell."

He glares at me. "What are you talking about? I'm not." His eyes lock onto the floor.

"Then you won't mind being drug-tested."

"Whatever. Fine."

"OK. I want to do it now."

"All right!"

"Get dressed."

"I know I should have called. I'm not using." He almost growls it.

"Let's go."

He hurries to his bedroom. Closes the door. He comes out wearing a Sonic Youth T-shirt and black jeans. One hand is thrust in his pocket, his head is down, his backpack is slung on one shoulder. In his other hand he holds his electric guitar by the neck. "You're right," he says. He pushes past me. "I've been using since I came home. I was using the whole semester." He leaves the house, slamming the door behind him.

I run outside and call after him, but he is gone. After a few stunned moments, I go inside again and en-ter his bedroom, sitting on his unmade bed. I retrieve a crumpled-up piece of paper under the desk. Nic wrote:

I'm so thin and frail/

Don't care, want another rail.

Late that afternoon, Jasper and Daisy burst in, dashing from room to room, before finally stopping and, looking up at me, asking, "Where's Nic?"

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I tried everything I could to prevent my son's fall into meth addiction. It would have been no easier to have seen him strung out on heroin or cocaine, but as every parent of a meth addict comes to learn, this drug has a unique, horrific quality. In an interview, Stephan Jenkins, the singer in Third Eye Blind, said that meth makes you feel "bright and shiny." It also makes you paranoid, delusional, destructive, and self-destructive. Then you will do unconscionable things in order to feel bright and shiny again. Nic had been a sensitive, sagacious, exceptionally smart and joyful child, but on meth he became unrecognizable.

Nic always was on the cutting edge of popular trends -- in their time, Care Bears, Pound Puppies, My Little Pony, Micro Machines, Transformers, He-Man and She-ra, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Star Wars, Nintendo, Guns N' Roses, grunge, Beck, and many others. He was a trailblazer with meth, too, addicted years before politicians denounced the drug as the worst yet to hit the nation. In the United States, at least twelve million people have tried meth, and it is estimated that more than one and a half million are addicted to it. Worldwide, there are more than thirty-five million users; it is the most abused hard drug, more than heroin and cocaine combined. Nic claimed that he was searching for meth his entire life. "When I tried it for the first time," he said, "that was that."

Our family's story is unique of course, but it is universal, too, in the way that every tale of addiction resonates with every other one. I learned how similar we all are when I first went to Al-Anon meetings. I resisted going for a long time, but these gatherings, though they often made me weep, strengthened me and assuaged my sense of isolation. I felt slightly less beleaguered. In addition, others' stories prepared me for challenges that would have otherwise blindsided me. They were no panacea, but I was grateful for even the most modest relief and any guidance whatsoever.

I was frantic to try to help Nic, to stop his descent, to save my son. This, mixed with my guilt and worry, consumed me. Since I am a writer, it's probably no surprise that I wrote to try to make some sense of what was happening to me and to Nic, and also to discover a solution, a cure that had eluded me. I obsessively researched this drug, addiction, and treatments. I am not the first writer for whom this work became a bludgeon with which to battle a terrible enemy, as well as an expurgation, a grasping for something (anything) fathomable amid calamity, and an agonizing process by which the brain organizes and regulates experience and emotion that overwhelms it. In the end, my efforts could not rescue Nic. Nor could writing heal me, though it helped.

Other writers' work helped, too. Whenever I pulled it off the shelf, Thomas Lynch's book Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality opened by itself to page 95, the essay "The Way We Are." I read it dozens of times, each time crying a little. With his child passed out on the couch, after arrests and drunk tanks and hospitalizations, Lynch, the undertaker and poet and essayist, looked at his dear addicted son with sad but lucid resignation, and he wrote: "I want to remember him the way he was, that bright and beaming boy with the blue eyes and the freckles in the photos, holding the walleye on his grandfather's dock, or dressed in his first suit for his sister's grade-school graduation, or sucking his thumb while drawing at the

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kitchen counter, or playing his first guitar, or posing with the brothers from down the block on his first day of school."

Why does it help to read others' stories? It's not only that misery loves company, because (I learned) misery is too self-absorbed to want much company. Others' experiences did help with my emotional struggle; reading, I felt a little less crazy. And, like the stories I heard at Al-Anon meetings, others' writing served as guides in uncharted waters. Thomas Lynch showed me that it is possible to love a child who is lost, possibly forever.

My writing culminated in an article about our family's experience that I submitted to the New York Times Magazine. I was terrified to invite people into our nightmare, but was compelled to do so. I felt that telling our story would be worthwhile if I could help anyone in the way that Lynch and other writers helped me. I discussed it with Nic and the rest of our family. Though encouraged by them, I was nonetheless nervous about exposing our family to public scrutiny and judgment. But the reaction to the article heartened me and, according to Nic, emboldened him. A book editor contacted him and asked if he was interested in writing a memoir about his experience, one that might inspire other young people struggling with addiction. Nic was eager to tell his story. More significantly, he said that he walked into AA meetings and when friends -- or even strangers -- made the connection between him and the boy in the article, they offered warm embraces and told him how proud they were of him. He said that it was a powerful affirmation of his hard work in recovery.

I also heard from addicts and their families -- their brothers and sisters, children, and other relatives, and, most of all, parents -- hundreds of them. A few respondents were critical. One accused me of exploiting Nic for my own purposes. Another, outraged at my description of a period when Nic briefly wore his clothes backward, attacked, "You let him wear backward clothes? No wonder he became an addict." But the great majority of letters were outpourings of compassion, consolation, counsel, and, most of all, shared grief. Many people seemed to feel that finally someone understood what they were going through. This is the way that misery does love company: People are relieved to learn that they are not alone in their suffering, that we are part of something larger, in this case, a societal plague -- an epidemic of children, an epidemic of families. For whatever reason, a stranger's story seemed to give them permission to tell theirs. They felt that I would understand, and I did.

"I am sitting here crying with shaking hands," a man wrote. "Your article was handed to me yesterday at my weekly breakfast of fathers who have lost their children. The man who handed it to me lost his sixteen-year-old son to drugs three years ago."

"Our story is your story," wrote another father. "Different drugs, different cities, different rehabs, but the same story."

And another: "At first, I was simply startled that someone had written my story about my child without my permission. Halfway through the emotional text of very familiar events and manifest conclusions, I realized that the dates of significant incidents were wrong, and thereby had to conclude that other parents may be experiencing the same inconceivable tragedies and loss that I have...

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"Insight acquired over a quarter of a century forces me to rewrite the last paragraph: Escaping from his latest drug rehab, my son overdosed and nearly died. Sent to a very special program in another city, he stayed sober for almost two years, then began disappearing again, sometimes for months, sometimes years. Having been one of the most brilliant students in the country's highest ranking high school, it took him twenty years to graduate from a mediocre college. And it has taken me just as long to discard my veil of impossible hope and admit that my son either cannot or will not ever stop using drugs. He is now forty years old, on welfare, and resides in a home for adult addicts."

There were so many more, many with unfathomably tragic conclusions. "But the ending of my story is different. My son died last year of an overdose. He was seventeen." Another: "My beautiful daughter is dead. She was fifteen when she overdosed." Another: "My daughter died." Another: "My son is dead." Letters and emails still interrupt my days with haunting reminders of the toll of addiction. My heart tears anew with each of them.

I kept writing and, through the painstaking process, had some success viewing our experience in a way that made sense to me -- as much sense as is possible to make of addiction. It led to this book. When I transformed my random and raw words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into chapters, a semblance of order and sanity appeared where there had been only chaos and insanity. As with the Times article, it scares me to publish our story. But with the continued encouragement of the principals, I go forward. There's no shortage of compelling memoirs by addicts, and the best of them oVer revelations for anybody who loves one. I hope Nic's book will become a compelling addition. And yet -- with rare exceptions, such as Lynch's essay -- we have not heard from those who love them. Anyone who has lived through it, or those who are now living through it, knows that caring about an addict is as complex and fraught and debilitating as addiction itself. At my worst, I even resented Nic because an addict, at least when high, has a momentary respite from his suffering. There is no similar relief for parents or children or husbands or wives or others who love them.

Nic used drugs on and off for more than a decade, and in that time I think that I have felt and thought and done almost everything an addict's parent can feel and think and do. Even now, I know that there's no single right answer, nor even a clear road map, for families of the addicted. However, in our story, I hope that there may be some solace, some guidance, and, if nothing else, yes, some company. I also hope that people can catch a glimpse of something that seems impossible during many stages of a loved one's addiction. Nietzsche is often quoted for having said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." This is absolutely true for family members

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of an addict. Not only am I still standing, but I know more and feel more than I once thought was possible.

In telling our story, I resisted the temptation to foreshadow, because it would be disingenuous -- and a disservice to anyone going through this -- to suggest that one can anticipate how things will unfold. I never knew what the next day would bring.

I've strived to honestly include the major events that shaped Nic and our family -- the good and the appalling. Much of it makes me cringe. I am aghast by so much of what I did and, equally, what I did not do. Even as all the experts kindly tell the parents of addicts, "You didn't cause it," I have not let myself off the hook. I often feel as if I completely failed my son. In admitting this, I am not looking for sympathy or absolution, but instead stating a truth that will be recognized by most parents who have been through this.

Someone who heard my story expressed bafflement that Nic would become addicted, saying, "But your family doesn't seem dysfunctional." We are dysfunctional -- as dysfunctional as every other family I know. Sometimes more so, sometimes less so. I'm not sure if I know any "functional" families, if functional means a family without difficult times and members who don't have a full range of problems. Like addicts themselves, the families of addicts are everything you would expect and everything you wouldn't. Addicts come from broken and intact homes. They are longtime losers and great successes. We often heard in lectures or Al-Anon meetings or AA meetings of the intelligent and charming men and women who bewilder those around them when they wind up in the gutter. "You're too good a man to do this to yourself," a doctor tells an alcoholic in a Fitzgerald story. Many, many people who have known Nic well have expressed similar sentiments. One said, "He is the last person I could imagine this happening to. Not Nic. He is too solid and too smart."

I also know that parents have discretionary recall, blocking out everything that contradicts our carefully edited recollections -- an understandable attempt to dodge blame. Conversely, children often fixate on the indelibly painful memories, because they have made stronger impressions. I hope that I am not indulging in parental revisionism when I say that in spite of my divorce from Nic's mother; in spite of our draconian long-distance custody arrangement; and in spite of all of my shortcomings and mistakes, much of Nic's early years was charmed. Nic confirms this, but maybe he is just being kind.

This rehashing in order to make sense of something that cannot be made sense of is common in the families of addicts, but it's not all we do. We deny the severity of our loved one's problem not because we are naive, but because we can't know. Even for those who, unlike me, never used drugs, it's an incontrovertible fact that many -- more than half of all children -- will try them. (Six thousand children try them in the US for the first time every day.) For some of those, they will have no major negative impact on their lives. For others, however, the outcome will be catastrophic. We parents wrack our brains and do everything we can and consult every expert and sometimes it's not enough. Only after the fact do we know that we didn't do enough or what we did do was wrong. Addicts are in denial and their families are in it with them because often the truth is too unimaginable, too painful, and too terrifying. But

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denial, however common, is dangerous. I wish someone had shaken me and said, "Intervene while you can before it's too late." It may not have made a difference, but I don't know. No one shook me and said it. Even if they had, I may not have been able to hear them. Maybe I had to learn the hard way.

Like many in my straits, I became addicted to my child's addiction. When it preoccupied me, even at the expense of my responsibilities to my wife and other children, I justified it. I thought, How can a parent not be consumed by his child's life-or-death struggle? But I learned that my preoccupation with Nic didn't help him and may have harmed him. Or maybe it was irrelevant to him. However, it surely harmed the rest of my family -- and me. Along with this, I learned another lesson, a startling one: our children live or die with or without us. No matter what we do, no matter how we agonize or obsess, we cannot choose for our children whether they live or die. It is a devastating realization, but also liberating. I finally chose life for myself. I chose the perilous but essential path that allows me to accept that Nic will decide for himself how -- and whether -- he will live his life.

As I said, I don't absolve myself, and meanwhile, I still struggle with how much I can absolve Nic. He is brilliant and wonderful and charismatic and loving when he's not using, but like every addict I have ever heard of, he becomes a stranger when he is, distant and foolish and self-destructive and broken and dangerous. I have struggled to reconcile these two people. Whatever the cause -- a genetic predisposition, the divorce, my drug history, my overprotectiveness, my failure to protect him, my leniency, my harshness, my immaturity, all of these -- Nic's addiction seemed to have had a life of its own. I have tried to reveal how insidiously addiction creeps into a family and takes over. So many times in the last decade I made mistakes out of ignorance, hope, or fear. I've tried to recount them all as and when they happened, in the hope that readers will recognize a wrong path before they take it. When they don't, however, I hope that they may realize that it is a path they can't blame themselves for having taken.

When my child was born, it was impossible to imagine that he would suffer in the ways that Nic has suffered. Parents want only good things for their children. I was a typical parent who felt that this could not happen to us -- not to my son. But though Nic is unique, he is every child. He could be yours.

Finally, the reader should know that I have changed a few names and details in the book to obscure the identities of some of the people herein. I begin when Nic was born. The birth of a child is, for many if not every family, a transformative event of joy and optimism. It was for us.

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