

Maria Lives

"I'm getting married!" gushed Maria. "He's the most handsome man I've ever met, he loves me to distraction, and why would we possibly want to wait? With both of our medical histories, this is the best time of our lives to commit. Will you stand up for me in our ceremony?"

Well, somewhere between elation for my friend and skepticism about the plan in general, I managed to say something supportive and even enthusiastic. Of course I'd be there for her. I was a friend and one of her team members, wasn't I? Then I realized that a third part of my response was jealousy. I'd have to share her with someone else. My jealousy was followed by a sense of relief: I would share what sometimes felt like a burden. I struggled to balance all four reactions and emotions before finding equilibrium that felt comfortable.

Eight years before, Maria had received a heart-breaking diagnosis and was given six months to live. I had walked with Maria as she faced crisis after crisis, I had struggled to help her create positive ways to live her life as her capabilities decreased and medical issues mounted. I had varied my role in her caregiving with the changing scenarios, and I'd found ways to continue my commitment. Could I do it again this time? Did I want to?

I determined that I did want to stay in Maria's life. I sought professional counseling to sort it all out, and as I did, the answer became clear. I'd have to give up some of

my role as best friend, confidant, and caregiver in favor of a simpler and more reciprocal friendship. Care-share team meetings—which once included eight or nine people—came down to only Maria, her case manager, and me. The meetings took a backseat to getting together for coffee and impromptu walks. It took some getting used to, but this was the beginning of a sweet time for Maria, her new husband, and me. After all, Maria had gotten stronger. She was capable of more flexibility and mutuality. And though her illness had progressed, she'd simultaneously grown healthier—focusing less on lesions and more on the world outside of her. As for me, I'd had to give up being the one who always gave. And until the day when Maria may again need more from me, I'll enjoy this freedom and the expanded friendship it's allowed.