



Charlie's Angels

Things that were hard to bear are sweet to remember.
~Seneca

I settled into bed and felt my heart heavy in my chest. Our fifteen-year-old Beagle, Charlie, had been declining for months. We heard his hacking cough, watched him drag himself across the floor, and noticed him periodically licking wounds from the cancer spreading inside him. But, at that moment, his snoring assured me he was finally sleeping.

"We have to do this for him," I said, turning to face my husband Brandon.

In Brandon's mind, we'd take Charlie to the vet for a lethal injection, say our goodbyes, and that would be it. Me? I started plotting how we could scatter Charlie's ashes at Brandon's late wife's grave. I didn't know if Sherise would want Charlie with her. I didn't even know if it was legal. But I hated the idea of her stuck in a cemetery flanked by strangers.

Brandon and I both want to be cremated when we die. He wants his remains tossed over Key West. I'm leaving my resting place up to our three children. Sherise's family members' post-death plans are up in the air. So, where does that leave her? Alone for eternity? It didn't seem right.

Sherise had been dead for fourteen years. I never met her, but I was acutely aware of how much she'd given me. I had inherited not only her husband, but also Charlie. The "regal Beagle," as we called

him, was a gift from Brandon to Sherise on her thirty-third birthday. "After she died, Charlie camped out at the front door waiting for her to come home," Brandon said. "He stayed there for three weeks."

The first time I visited Brandon, Charlie rushed to the door to greet me and then spun circles around me like something out of a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon.

"He seems to like you," said Brandon.

"Nah, he just wants to play," I said as I wrestled with him.

If Charlie fell in love with me on the spot, it took me longer to warm up. I'm not a dog person. I even viewed Charlie as a strike against Brandon — a constant reminder of the tragedy he'd suffered.

But Charlie's playful nature, uncanny intuition, and dogged pursuit of the last strip of bacon won me over. I pushed him off my lap during *90210* reruns, only to have him nuzzle his wet nose under my elbow until I relented and stroked his ear.

After I moved in with Brandon, Charlie became my home-office mate. He kept me company while I worked and hogged half the couch during lunch breaks. Still, I insisted Charlie was not my dog; I was just his caretaker by default.

At thirteen, when many Beagles call it quits, Charlie tried to keep up with the three children we ambushed him with. He traversed rooms littered with LEGOs, lapped up every high-chair mishap, and plopped on top of our board games mid-play. If the kids' antics took a toll on him, he didn't show it, even while navigating a litany of health problems. He developed cancer at ten, lost his left hind leg at twelve, and had surgery for a bleeding growth at fourteen.

Now more white than brown, and with only three legs, Charlie turned away from his food and water bowls. We knew he was nearing the end of the road. Still, we had been flip-flopping for weeks about whether to put him down.

I cuddled up next to Charlie at night and saw my reflection in his liquid brown eyes. "What should we do, sweet boy? Is it time?" I whispered while he drifted off to sleep.

Desperate for guidance, I asked Sherise to send us a sign. The next day, Charlie vomited not once or twice, but five times.

“There’s your sign,” Brandon said.

Despite his easy answer, I knew Brandon was struggling. Charlie carried him through the darkest times of his life. He and Sherise had just bought a new house. They were decorating a home and planning for children when a car accident took her life. Charlie was the single tie left from their union — the only bridge between her family and mine.

“They should be together, don’t you think?” I asked Brandon.

“Probably, but what does that even look like?” he said, with a million questions in his eyes.

So, I started researching our options and ultimately hired a mobile veterinarian to come to our house, deliver an injection and return Charlie’s ashes to us. Half would stay on our dresser. The other half would go into the earth with Sherise.

The night before we put Charlie down, I yearned to see a picture of him as a puppy. I wanted to know what he looked like before Sherise died. After I tucked our kids into bed, I saw a box on our dining room table.

“If I have a picture of Charlie as a puppy, it’s in here,” Brandon said. I studied him closely as we riffled through the losses in that box — pictures of a family full of promise, her wallet with her ID and credit cards still in the pockets, the coroner’s report, and court documents.

“Ugh, Brandon, I’m so sorry,” I said, my stare fixed on an image of him carrying Sherise against the backdrop of a Hawaiian beach. He didn’t linger in the sadness. The box reopened the wound, but it was no longer bleeding. And there among the rubble was a picture of twelve-week-old Charlie.

Almost fourteen years to the day after Sherise’s funeral, Brandon put Charlie’s ashes in our minivan, and we set out to reunite our dog with his first owner.

I packed up our boys along with our picnic lunches. They knew we were returning Charlie to Sherise — some of him anyway. They even imagined him in Heaven as evidenced by the drawings they carried with them.

Our six-year-old, Jack, drew Charlie next to a Rainbow Bridge with

the words, "Giddy up." Eight-year-old Max's masterpiece showcased an angel welcoming Charlie to Heaven. And Brian, also eight, drew Charlie as an angel beside an old-style telephone. The caption read: "This is what you can use to call us."

I laid out the blanket, and we ate PB&Js while sharing Charlie memories. The time Brandon replanted the flower beds and Charlie lay on top of the freshly planted soil. The time he couldn't find his way out of the duvet cover. And the time he tried swimming but sunk like a stone.

As our time wound down, Brandon pulled Charlie's ashes out of the jar. "Let's do this," he said, removing the vase near her headstone. Then each of us took a turn scattering Charlie's ashes into the earth.

When the jar was empty, I saw Brandon stand back and tear up. I assumed he was missing Charlie or Sherise. Maybe both? Then I realized his tears were not of sadness, but of gratitude.

"If someone had told me fifteen years ago that my wife would die six months after we married, and then I would visit her grave with my second wife and our three sons to scatter her Beagle's ashes years later, I never would have believed it," he said. And yet, we were all there, all somehow connected.

— Amy Paturel —