

Meira Bienstock

The Choices We Make

The veterinarian told us Charlie had six months left to live. That's only if we went through with the surgery. He had liver cancer. Charlie was our basset hound. He was four years old and we had had him since he was born. We had gotten him through a breeder in New Hampshire.

Everywhere my husband and I went, Charlie went. When I went on my three-mile runs through the rocky trails here in Western Maine, Charlie came with me. When my husband, Noah, went hunting up North, Charlie went with him, his feet soft and silent, his dopey ears perking up and his nose pulling out before he sent Noah on a wild-goose chase. (One year he led Noah right up to a buck which we took home for dinner for two weeks.) When we would paint at the rivers, our easels standing upright on the rocks, wine bottles lying by our bare feet, Charlie would wander around us, dipping his tongue into the river. He'd split his time between posing for us as he watched the butterflies or splashing through the river and trying to catch fish.

So of course we said yes to the surgery, even though it cost six thousand dollars and I was expecting in thirteen weeks. We sold our well-traveled Subaru. It had around 200,000 miles on it, and with me being so far along in my pregnancy, I was hardly driving solo through Maine these days. We lived in too rural of a town. So we laid down the six grand and Charlie lived through it.

And now here we are, at the Sanborn River, painting.

“Looks like a turd,” I say, examining Noah’s painting.

“WHAT!” he exclaims, turning the easel towards him. “It’s Charlie, clear as day. You turd.” He sticks his tongue out at me.

I laugh. “It’s still art!”

“Think we should get ol’ boy home for dinner?”

“He does look a bit peakish.” I pick up our brushes and wash them in the river. The red paint melts into the water. “Did you catch any fish or were you too busy painting?”

Noah takes our paintings and lies them on the rocks. He folds up our easels. “I painted a picture of a fish,” he teases.

The paintbrushes are all rung out and I cry out as I rest my hand on my lower back, trying to regain balance from the edge of the river. With one hand, Noah picks up the squirming Charlie from the river, and with the other, wraps his hand around my forearm gently. “Easy does it,” he says, pulling me back slowly. “Easy.”

Soon, we’re back at home in our small A-frame house that’s painted bright red. There are three small levels with a winding staircase in the middle. Right now, we’ve flip-flopped the living room with our bedroom so I don’t have to climb the staircase every day. There’s not much furniture...a queen size bed, a bureau with a pastel blue lamp on it, and in the kitchen an oak table with two chairs and a highchair. We’ve invested everything into our art supplies and the babies room. That’s on the second floor. We’ve painted it turquoise with a jungle theme and lots of dark and light green pillows. Even a dinosaur pillow. We’re going to have a boy!

I lie sideways on the bed, tucking pillows below me, while Noah opens the mail in the kitchen, his eyebrows furrowed. Charlie jumps up next to me, his long ears swinging.

“Anything good, baby?” I ask Noah.

“A lot of junk,” he replies, tearing an envelope in half. He looks up. “When did we decide on a LOWES credit card?”

I squirm on the bed, moving a pillow out from under me. “When the cradle from there cost two hundred and fifty dollars and we wanted the twenty percent off.”

He scoffs and crumples the paper and tosses it into the trash, making the dunk. “Such a waste of paper, and so bad for the environment. We live in a digital age...why are people still sending crap in the mail?”

“Please, Noah, can you not be negative around me? I don’t want the baby to get bad vibes.”

Noah opens his mouth then bites his lip and says brightly, “So what do you want for dinner?”

“We’ll figure the money out,” I say, closing my eyes, my hands resting on my stomach. “For the baby crib. For everything. Please don’t worry.”

I hear Noah’s bare feet softly padding the floor as he makes his way to me, feel the bed squash down just barely, then, feel his fingers brushing my hair out of my eyes which I open with a smile. He kisses my forehead sideways and says, “I love you,” before lying beside me, picking up a mystery novel, and becoming silent.

That's the nice part of being with Noah. I can always tell when he's upset, even if he's just talking about the mail. After being together for six years, it's like his mind is broadcasted in front of me with his inner thoughts. We're lucky that we're happy together and can communicate. We are very lucky, indeed. I have to remind myself that despite the fact Charlie only has six months left with us. It is still time and what greater gift than that?

Five months later

Our son's name is Hunter. He's got loads of blonde curls, just like Noah. He likes to crawl around in the grass in our backyard and pull it up and toss it, laughing wildly while doing so. We've taken him to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park and he likes to sit on Noah's shoulders and point at anything that lights up. Once we took him open-water fishing and he burst into tears when he saw the fish on the hook, thrashing. I'm positive Noah also cried because he wanted Hunter to love fishing.

For all the laughing and screaming he does, he screams most during the night. At first Noah told me to sleep, he'd rock him to sleep. But we found Hunter fell asleep faster when I held him. After he falls asleep, wakes up, then falls asleep again, wakes up, then finally is asleep, my head feels heavy and my feet feel sore, but I can't fall asleep. It's been two months since I slept.

I took one nap for four hours, just knocked out on our bed, my body feeling like it was rock being pulled down in water. When I awoke, Noah was feeding Hunter apple sauce and sitting on a mint green bean bag chair flying him above his head.

I could hear Noah singing Van Halen songs to him in a hushed voice. Charlie was watching me, his big brown eyes wide with concern. Thing was, it was my turn to watch Hunter. It must have been two-thirty pm when I

dozed off. Noah didn't get home until four-thirty pm. That means, Hunter could have been crying in his crib for two hours and I would have had no idea. That was the day I stopped sleeping.

Instead, I force myself to stay wide awake. I drink red bulls, coffee, black tea, and green tea. I am super-Mom and super-Woman with all this caffeine. I read him books about rabbits and play him the Bach Cello Suites. I take him to our (once living room) art studio and we paint stick figures with circles inside circles inside circles and suns and rivers. I take him on walks with Charlie.

He loves Charlie. The basset hound is always running in circles around him then cuddling up next to him. The two are best friends, speaking their own language. They seem to have their own private jokes the way Hunter giggles when Charlie nudges him with his nose. He likes to play in the river and splash Hunter with the river water. They crawl and walk at the same pace. Charlie even lets Hunter tug his ears out and soar them as though they are an airplane.

Charlie coughs a lot now and the lumps are spreading across his tummy. He wheezes when he walks for more than a mile. He can't go up the staircase to visit Hunter's room. He tried and toppled backwards over himself, falling down three flights of stairs and smacking his head on the wooden floor.

We took him to the veterinarian right after that to ensure he was okay. He was fine, the veterinarian confirmed, five hundred dollars later, after a brain scan. He did find that the cancer had spread to Charlie's brain. My heart jumped to my stomach. I thought he was getting better as it was nearing six months since the surgery and he seemed so happy with so much energy.

We took Hunter and Charlie to Cape Elizabeth that day, not talking in the car. Some light flicked on telling us we needed to get our oil changed just as we hit a red light.

Noah groaned, leaning back against the headrest.

“I’ll go back to work,” I say quietly. “I can pick up extra hours, bring in some extra cash—” “No way,” Noah responded, equaling as quiet. “You have three months paid maternity leave, this is your time with Hunter. You both need it. Can’t have anything happening to my babies,” he says, taking my hand. He looks back up at the red light. “I wanted to talk with you...there’s this freelance opportunity I could take on after work. Parking cars, valet, you know? I could bring in an extra three hundred a week.”

“I don’t know...how often would you do it?” “Just twice a week.”

I bite my lip.

“It’ll just be for a few months. Just until you’re working again and we’re back on our feet.” He looks up and sees the light has changed to green. “You can call my parents if you need anything and I’m not there.”

“I’m just worried you’ll spend less time with Hunter during the most pivotal time.” “You know we don’t have much left since the surgery and the baby spree where we bought, everything.”

I sigh. “Okay, just promise me it’ll only be twice a week.”

“I promise.”

I haven’t slept for four months. Noah is working two jobs, one full-time, the other four days a week, including the weekends. I’m back to work, and wearing such a big smile, my face hurts most days. My teeth hurt

sometimes too from wearing this ghastly smile. Hunter is now at daycare and I call twice a day to check in. Now the daycare woman texts me pictures of him throughout the day to reassure me he's OK.

Most evenings after dinner, Noah and I paint with Hunter and he presses his hand in the paint and places it on the paper. Charlie does the same only with his paws. Soon, we're all throwing paint at another and over the walls and laughing so hard our tummies hurt. By the time it's dark, everyone has crashed and is asleep. Except me.

I read novels about love stories. I do face masks and paint my nails. I look at pictures of Noah and me when we were in our late twenties and had just started dating. I do anything but sleep. When Hunter starts crying, I'm already there to calm him down. And he falls asleep as fast as he woke up.

Because secretly, my hands are shaking nonstop whenever I try and read the escape novels or type at work. My tears always ruin the face masks I attempt to paint on and I spend my lunch breaks biting my lip so often I have a scab. And my heart burns whenever I look at older pictures of Noah and me and sometimes when I see him during the day. With the lack of sleep brings on a deep paranoia and heavy insecurities.

I'm convinced Noah is having an affair with one of the waitresses at the restaurant he valets. Why else would he come home so late and not respond to my texts at work? Why else would he pass out after the day he works both of his jobs back to back?

More so, why would he want me over some pretty young stable woman? I'm still shedding my baby fat and my mid-thirties metabolism is slowing down despite my constant walking and cardio pilates. Why would he stay with me when he barely even sees me? And when he does, half of my sentences are half-put together, or spoken so fast, he can't understand me.

The funny thing about not sleeping is I don't feel all that tired. I'm tired in the early mornings, when I wake up after my two-hour nap. But otherwise, I'm packing Hunter's milk, books, and toys up in a bag swiftly...I'm walking Charlie as I walk Hunter at six a.m. while Noah cooks us up eggs and bacon.

"I'm really concerned about you," Noah says every day. "This isn't healthy. You need to tell your psychiatrist."

"It's normal after pregnancy to stay with the baby during the night," I always respond. "Hunter is sleeping fine now. He has been for the past two weeks."

I shrug. "Charlotte, please, do this for me," begs Noah.

"Quit that valet job, then," I retort.

"Fine, I will. If that's what it takes to get my wife back, I'll quit today."

He looks at me straight on and I realize all that paranoia about the other women has been just that. Paranoia. I want my husband back. I've been pushing him away.

"OK. I'll tell my psychiatrist," I sigh.

Charlie died. I'm now drugged up on antipsychotics and benzos. I went from maternity leave to back to work to now on short term disability leave. Noah is looking up the best psych ward to stash me in while he'll be watching Hunter. The best ones are in Massachusetts, like the one that the writers Sylvia Plath and Susanna Kaysen stayed in.

I see a therapist three times a week. Her name is Luanne and she has bright orange hair and wears cat-like pointy black glasses. She keeps asking me about my mood and I keep telling her Charlie died. My dog died. My first dog who always listened to me when Noah was away—he's just died. She asks me about Hunter and Noah. I cry and can't catch my breath.

"I just want us to be a normal family again with normal work hours and normal sleep hours and normal baby crying hours," I sob. "I'm so sick of worrying about money. We wouldn't have half these problems if we weren't broke."

"Charlotte," she says tentatively. "Noah isn't working two jobs anymore. Hunter is sleeping as normal as babies can. You said you two have paid off all your baby spree debt with the money from the second job he had. It's OK to just relax now. It's OK to sleep now."

I just shake my head as tears stream down my face. "I'm a failure as a mother and a wife."

"No, you're not. You need to take care of yourself. Is there anything that relaxes you enough to calm down and sleep?"

I stare ahead at the wall, seeing a projection of Noah in my mind waving at me to respond.

"I don't know."

"Why don't you relax and get in bed at the same time your family does. Even if you don't sleep, it will help your body get in the right sleeping schedule. Help it to know when it's time to sleep. So you fall asleep at two a.m., right?"

I nod.

“Why don’t you get into bed when Noah does, but take your pills at one a.m. instead? Just rewind the clock bit by bit until it is ten pm.”

I see Noah in my mind jumping up and down with enthusiasm.

“I can try that.”

Noah puts Hunter to bed tonight. I’m sitting at the kitchen table in silk purple shorts and matching tanktop that my sister bought for me when Noah and I got married. In my lap is the ‘Twilight’ novel. In front of me is a bowl of vegetable soup. I’ve got a mug of steaming chamomile tea and soy milk. In the center of the kitchen table are three lilac candles.

Noah kisses me goodnight then puts three Melatonin’s on the table next to my pill bottles.

“Whenever you come to bed, just wake me up,” he says, smoothing my hair back.

“We’re both supposed to get good shut-eye!” I laugh.

“We will,” he says, squeezing my hand.

He walks around the island in our kitchen and back into our bedroom, which we’ve left on the first floor.

I sit and read and eat and drink tea while the candles burn. I do this for an hour until I'm fully relaxed. Then, I crawl into bed with Noah. He wraps his arms around me and kisses me before he turns over and presses his head into the pillow.

I stay up reading while Noah falls asleep. Soon, I can hear the whole house breathing. I can hear Hunter breathing from his crib, I can hear Noah breathing softly next to me, and I can hear the wind whistling outside through the pine trees and across the frozen pond behind our home. I long to be with them in their peaceful dreams, tucked away from reality. Then, I realize, reality isn't so bad. The worse has passed and we are still here.

All those fears about us becoming homeless, about not raising my son right or not being there for him when he needs me most, about my husband working so much he finds a new love and abandons me—the nut who never sleeps; all these fears never served me but destroyed me. I wonder if I had put that energy into making the opposite happen, maybe our lives would be richer, and not just with money but with life.

It is never too late to start. I take my pills and curl up next to Noah. He takes my hand from his half-slumber and I squeeze it. It's only eleven pm and already I am asleep.

THE END