

## Charlie

By: Taylor Whiteman

With her key in the ignition the big cat roared to life. As Michele backed out of her parent's driveway and proceeded down the street, the car sputtered and backfired. A trail of black smoke marked her route down the street. Rolling her eyes, she had come to understand in the past few weeks why her mother just gave her this brand-new Jaguar convertible. One of the first Jaguar XJ-S convertibles to cross the Atlantic, her mother fell in love with the car. Little did she know that it was a 3000-pound death trap; constantly breaking down and emitting a sulfur smelling exhaust. Michele's mother decided it was best to go back to driving her Mercedes 500SEL, graciously gifting Michele her 'beloved' Jaguar.

Michele was thankful, at first. But Michele found herself extremely frustrated at her 'gift'. The more she thought about it the more she realized that over the last 18 months Michele found herself extremely frustrated at her parents. After she graduated college her parents wanted her to move back home, which was not her ideal situation. Michele's parents convinced her that it would be a good idea to live at home for 6 months, but it had been 18 months now and she couldn't leave. It wasn't that she didn't have the money to move out, it was that her parents didn't want her to. She felt terrible thinking of upsetting them but every day she lived there she found herself feeling worse. She was waiting for the day that her parents would give their blessing for her to move out. But with the tensions rising at home and young adult life having its ups and downs, she started to spend more and more time with Charlie. Charlie was her therapist, someone went to and asked life's 'big' questions. Questions like why she found herself crying all the time or why she had forgotten what it felt like to be 'happy'

But with the top down on her sleek convertible cruising down Route 46 all of her problems seemed to fade away. She played her favorite tape through the speakers, Sade's *Diamond Life*. Softly she hummed to *Smooth Operator*. The wind flowed through her long brown hair and the sunlight reflected off of her gold rimmed Ray-Ban Aviators.

Her car glided around the jug-handle onto Route 17 before taking the first exit into Hasbrook Heights, she wasn't quite sure where she was going, but was by no means lost. She knew what roads to take, what lights to turn right at, and that grey office building in which he worked, but couldn't tell you his address. She just knew where to go, she knew how to get to Charlie.

She parked her car in the garage across the street, next to that 'exotic' pet store and Krazy Nails. She crossed the street and went up to Charlie's office. When the elevator doors opened to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, there he was standing there patiently awaiting her arrival.

"How are you doing today Michele?" Charlie said jovially with a small grin on his face.

"Things have been better" she replied back, pulling off her oversized Aviators revealing her mud brown eyes.

Charlie was a man who stood only 5 foot 8, but acted with the confidence that he was 6'2". Looking only sixty years old, when in reality he was much closer to eighty, he had the heart of a lion and ears that were so large they might have belonged on an elephant. Charlie was a good man, Michele always thought. He listened to her, and acknowledged her problems, which was more than anyone had ever done for her. She knew that he only listened because she was paying him \$100 an hour, but she liked to think that he actually cared.

She felt safe with him. Charlie called himself an 'unconventional therapist', and while Michele was nervous with that at first, it just meant that he wanted to be seen as more than a

therapist. Charlie wanted to be friends with his patients, he wanted them to feel comfortable and safe around him. It took Michele some time, but Charlie came to be someone she found herself laughing and crying with. To Michele, Charlie became more than her therapist, he became her confidant.

“Let’s go for a walk today”, Charlie suggested. “The A/C here is busted and it’s so nice out today.”

Michele didn’t say anything, just pressed the elevator call button and nodded. It wasn’t uncommon for the two of them to go on walks instead of sitting in his stuffy, cramped office. And as the stainless steel walled elevator doors opened and the two stepped inside, Michele dove right into her problems.

Her mind was moving a mile a minute, and with each floor the elevator lurched and Michele dove into a different problem in her life.

“I can’t live with my parents anymore, I can’t have anyone come over”

Ba-Dunk. The elevator shook the two of them inside its metal cage.

“I feel like my parents enjoy keeping me around the house. I feel like a pet.”

Ba-Dunk.

“And my she threw away all the chocolate in the house. She thinks I’ll get fat.”

Ba-Dunk. The elevator doors began to open.

“Okay Michele, one thing at a time.” Charlie said with a smile stepping out of the steel box.

The two of them began to stroll down the busy two-lane avenue. Michele began to talk and talk and talk. Just vocalizing the problems in her life seemed to alleviate the weight they put on her chest. All Charlie did was listen, his eyes staring off into the monotony of the world in

front of them. She sometimes thought he wasn't paying attention but then he would chime in with the perfect remark. Something poignant or jovial, always making her think and sometimes making her laugh.

People in cars whizzed by, honking their horns and skidding their tires. Stout Italian women bargained with shop keeps and men in construction hats stood on street corners whistling at every woman who walked by. None of this phased Michele and Charlie. They were laughing together and that's all that mattered to the two of them.

As Michele and Charlie walked into the small Italian deli, they ordered two cups of coffee and sat down at a small metal table. It looked like a patio table that used to sit in the owner's backyard, with a rusty table top and Charlie's chair leg shorter than the others, probably from years of grinding against pavers. The whole place smelled of old fish and burnt coffee. Charlie joked that he couldn't tell if it was because of the fish they sold or the two old men in the corner playing dominos.

They sat there, conducting their formal meeting in such an informal setting. Charlie made jokes about the problems Michele had in her life, alleviating the stress and significance she put on them. He had no qualms about calling her mother a "possessive bitch"; or telling her that she was wrong which sometimes would make her cry.

"I think it's so funny that my mother would give me that car," said Michele. "She wanted it for so long but when she realized how unsafe it was she tried to pawn it off on me as a 'gift'."

"You think she gave it to you because she didn't like it," Charlie replied.

“She loves it. It’s just that, it’s impossible to drive. It sputters and backfires and smells like sulfur.”

“Michele, we live in New Jersey. Everything smells like sulfur.”

Michele chuckled and said, “But still, every time I get in it, it reminds me of her.”

“Then sell it? Go to Park Ave Motors down the street and trade it in. It’s a brand-new Jaguar, I’m sure you’ll get something good in exchange.”

“I can’t do that, it was a gift from them. I’d feel bad getting rid of it.”

“Michele, you will feel bad if you keep it. Every time you drive it you will think of your mother and how much you don’t like her. If you sell it you will feel bad. They will probably be upset with you for a while and you will be upset because of it.” Charlie spoke in a calm, even manner. “But sometimes in life there isn’t an easy option. You need to make a decision here. Either keep the car and make yourself unhappy or sell the car and make your parents unhappy. You can’t make everyone happy in life, but you can try to make yourself happy.”

“But making them happy makes me happy.”

“Then keep the car, Michele,” Charlie paused. “But realize that you aren’t as happy as you think.”

Michele sat there, mulling the ultimatum presented to her. She sipped her coffee, looked around the room, and soaked in the scene. She really thought about what Charlie had just said, how he believes she needs to take more control in her life. Michele always thought she totally in control of her destiny, but the more she thought about it the more she realized how possessive her parents could be. She thought about how they kept her trapped at home with them, like the

Yorkshire Terriers they caged under the kitchen counter. She thought about how they trapped her in that Jaguar, a car her mother didn't want to drive but wanted to look at in the driveway. She swirled the remaining amount of brown coffee in her paper cup and sighed. Michele's life had become quiet and mundane when all she wanted wild and exciting.

"Charlie, would you call me 'aimless'?" Michele asked.

"Never. Driven is a much better word" Charlie said with a smile.

They sat in that small, smelly coffee shop for what felt like hours but in reality, was only maybe twenty minutes. Charlie checked his watch and realized that their time together was almost up. They got up and began the walk back to his office. On the walk back Michele turned the tables, and asked Charlie how he was doing. She found it refreshing to talk about someone else for a bit, especially after their hour and a half long conversation, she was feeling more relaxed and confident than usual. They talked about the weather, and his seven-year old grandson. They joked about life and happenings in the news.

They passed the construction workers on the corner, on the other side of the street, they and whistled and hollered at Michele and Charlie. Both of them chuckled because they couldn't tell if they thought that they were a couple. Michele gave Charlie a sly glance and a smile, letting him know that she was up to no good. She was feeling relaxed and confident so she did something that she knew was wrong but thought would be completely innocuous. The two of them kept walking, but she turned her body towards the two men covered in dirt and sweat. She looked to Charlie one last time, almost to apologize in advance. Then, looking at the two men, batted her eyelashes, shook her chest, and blew them a kiss. She felt free and happy and wanted

to share that with the world, even though she knew this was the stupidest way to do that.

Michele's hands rushed to her mouth to hide her laughter and blushed cheeks. Charlie couldn't stop laughing. The two men began to clap and whistle at Michele and she just waved back doubled over in laughter.

The two of them stood at the corner waiting for the walk sign, laughing louder than the sounds of exhaust pipes that passed them. They laughed and laughed, tears forming at their eyes and hands against their hearts. At least that's what Michele thought until she saw Charlie had fallen. He was lying there on the sidewalk not laughing anymore. Her laughter slowed, and between chuckles asked Charlie if he was ok. He had a smile on his face but didn't respond. His eyes were open and his hand was on his chest. Michele couldn't believe it, something had gone horribly wrong. One of the construction workers ran across the street to Charlie's side.

"Paulie, call an ambulance!" the man said with a thick New York accent.

The other man ran to a payphone to call 911. The construction worker threw his helmet onto the sidewalk and began to push against Charlie's chest. He breathed slowly into his mouth trying to resuscitate Charlie. All the while Michele stood there, as still and flush as a marble sculpture. By now her laughter turned to tears as her breathing picked up pace, unable to process what was happening.

The world flew by in front of her, and she just stood there. Too frightened to move and too fragile to speak. The sounds of police cars and an ambulance made their way through the buildings she began to wail. Her black mascara ran down her face and splattered the concrete like a Jackson Pollock painting. She could not believe that this was happening. Michele's hands were trembling and her pupils were dilated. A certain smell invaded her nostrils, replacing the usual scents of sulfur with one she called death.

As the paramedics arrived on scene, one rushed to Charlie's side, taking over the chest compressions. The other ran to Michele, trying to calm her down and understand what had happened. She couldn't speak, she couldn't think, she could barely cry. She just stood there screaming. The paramedics pulled the stretcher out of the back of the ambulance, Michele ran towards them screaming that he was ok. She thought he was fine, that this was just a bad joke gone too far. A police officer pulled her away. Charlie was loaded on to the gurney and into the back of the ambulance. It was in the back of the ambulance that they shouted out the two words that would shatter an already fragile girl.

"He's gone."

Michele lost whatever confidence she was feeling just five minutes earlier. She went limp in the police officer's arms and sobbed. Charlie was gone, she could not understand. When she finally calmed down, the police officer sat with her on the curb asked her questions that she didn't really know the answers to.

"What happened before Charlie had a heart attack?"

"I don't know. I did something to make him laugh and then he collapsed," Michele replied.

"We were just laughing, I can't believe he's gone," she muttered.

She then began mutter, "We were just laughing," over and over.

"Are you his daughter?" the officer asked breaking Michele's monotone monotony.

"No, he's my therapist."

"Do you know his family? Do you know anyone we can call?"

"I know he has a son that lives in Lodi. But I don't know his name."



These questions went on for a half hour before the officer told Michele that she was “good to go.” Good to go, she thought. She is not good, this man just died before her eyes. She cannot go, her legs won’t listen. The officer got up and proceeded back to his car. He noticed she didn’t follow and turned back around to her. He extended his hand to her, helping her up off the curb. Her legs were shaking and her heart was racing. Her ears were ringing, and the officer was talking to her but she couldn’t understand what he was saying. She wiped the tears and mascara from her face and, of all things, apologized to the police officer. He smiled and said she had nothing to be sorry for.

She turned and continued her walk down the street back to her car. Her Jaguar parked across from Charlie’s office. For the first time, she looked up at the street signs. She needed to know where she was. Baldwin Avenue. Charlie died on the corner of Baldwin Avenue and Main Street around 12:30pm on April 18<sup>th</sup> 1984.

Michele found her way back to her car. She turned the key in the ignition, the car sputtered but did not turn over. She slammed her hands on the steering wheel, frustrated at how the car didn’t know that she was too upset to deal with this. She slammed down on the steering wheel and honked the horn in frustration trying to hide the sounds of her sobs. Michele calmed herself down and she tried to start the car again, this time it did. Sputtering out of the parking lot back to her parent’s home her fingers felt cold and were trembling. Her mind was on autopilot, taking her down the streets and highways and not before long she found herself sitting in the driveway.

With the engine still running she sat there for a few minutes. Trying to come to terms with what just happened. She thought about how everything could go from so fine to so bad in an

instant, about how happy she felt a few hours ago, and about how she never paid Charlie today and where she should mail the check.

She walked into the house her mother stood there peeling apples in the kitchen sink. She looked over at Michele and said, “You don’t look pretty when you’ve been crying.” Michele felt unfazed by this remark. She had no room inside her for any other emotion besides grief. Her body was full of it, and she felt as if her frail frame couldn’t feel anything else ever again. She stopped in the doorway of the kitchen and replied, “Charlie died.” Her mother didn’t stop peeling apples and didn’t respond.

Michele went into her room and sat at her desk. She tried to understand what had happened but couldn’t. She couldn’t wrap her head around the situation. She didn’t eat dinner. She didn’t listen to music. She just sat at her desk until her eyelids began to flicker, which drove her into bed.

When she woke up in the morning, everything felt alright. Then she turned over in her bed and the memories washed over her. She had enjoyed a split second of solace, before remembering that Charlie had died. She laid in bed for a good part of that morning. Then around 11am, the same time that her appointment had started yesterday, she got up and got ready to face the day.

She started up her car and drove back down to Hasbrook Heights. She followed the same path she took yesterday but this time not stopping at the parking lot, but the corner of Baldwin and Main. She pulled off the to the side and opened her door. She left a dozen roses on the street corner. She sat them up against the light post on the corner, and when they are perfectly situated, pulled out one of the roses and set it on the dashboard of her car. She continued down the road.

Michele took in a deep breath and activated her turn signal. She pulled into the dealership. She sold her Jaguar to Park Ave Motors with the rose still sitting on the dashboard. She drove off the lot in a new BMW and headed down Route 17 to Fort Lee. She parked out front of a real estate office. Michele lied to the agent inside about how a friend of hers told her that needed a nice apartment. She sounded so calm and collected but all the while her chest was pounding. She signed lease papers that afternoon for a nice 2-bedroom not too far from her job. As she out of the real estate office she started to laugh.

She felt the same butterflies in her stomach as she had yesterday afternoon with Charlie. She started to laugh, and tears soon followed. But she didn't feel sad, she was still laughing. In that moment, she realized that Charlie was right, she can make herself really happy. Michele didn't know any other way to honor Charlie than to listen to him. She knew that her parents were overbearing. She knew that her mother was a "possessive bitch". And even if Charlie wouldn't admit it, she knew life with her parents had made her complacent and aimless. Michele knew Charlie was right.

Michele sat in her car, outside the real estate office. She put her hands on the steering wheel and closed her eyes. She remembered Charlie the first time they ever met. Michele remembered how Charlie called himself an "unconventional therapist". She thought about how unconventional it was for your therapist to die during a session. Michele also realized how it took an event as unconventional as your therapist dying during a session to truly push her to be her break free of the past and become her own person.