



# Waiting for Charlotte

Heather Carnaghan

For my sweet baby Charlotte  
and all the possibility and wonder that your tiny body held.

For my treasured boys, Jack and Sam,  
and all the memories that we have yet to make  
and will never take for granted.

For my best friend, Ian,  
and every minute of this beautiful, unpredictable  
journey together as parents.

*"There is, I am convinced,  
no picture that conveys in all its dreadful-  
ness, a vision of sorrow, despairing, remediless, supreme.  
If I could paint such a picture, the canvas would show  
only a woman looking down at her empty arms."*

*-Charlotte Brontë*



## My Little Ninja

I should start this story with the confession that waiting is not my strength. When you are a planner and a fixer, waiting feels like a terrible limbo in which you have no control, no movement, and no progress. It makes me uncomfortable in a deep and painful way that is hard to explain. I am the squirmer whose impatient foot shaking rocks the entire row of chairs in the waiting room. I bring papers to grade and books to read when I know I will have a five minute wait-time before an appointment. Staying still, both physically and metaphorically, is difficult for me.

I don't get blindsided easily because I tend to plan rather obsessively, but Charlotte managed to surprise me. My husband, Ian, and I weren't planning to have a third child. I had always wanted to have a girl, but after Jack and Sam were born, we were happy with our little family and stopped consciously trying for more children. In February, I began feeling nauseated. I never experienced morning sickness with either of my boys, so I didn't think it was anything more than a cold. It didn't occur to me that this could be something more until I sped off to the bathroom and a fellow teacher joked, "Uh oh, here comes number three!" That evening, I took the test in our bathroom as the boys pounded on the door. Moms of toddlers aren't allowed locked doors, as you know, so Jack and Sam knew something was up when the knob wouldn't turn. A pregnancy test takes about two minutes to show a result. In those 120 seconds, I realized just how much I wanted this baby. I imagined telling Sam he would be a big brother just like Jack. I imagined telling Ian he would be a daddy again. I imagined holding that precious, sleepy, intoxicating baby-smelling little person against my chest. *Positive!* The screen flashed positive, and a beautiful new life began.

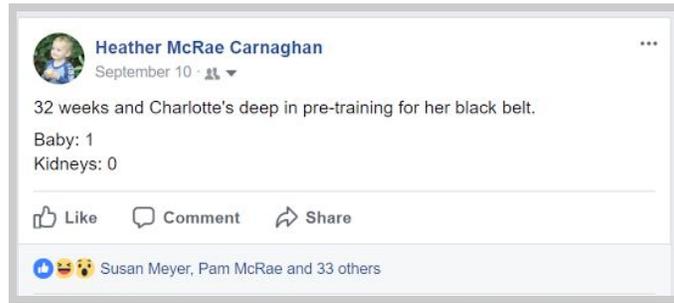


We all know this doesn't end well, but I say "beautiful" because there really were so many beautiful moments. Some might seem silly to a reader who hasn't had or lost a child, but they seem to be the moments I miss the most now. Hearing her heartbeat for the first time made the pregnancy feel real. Sonograms and ultrasounds reassured us she was perfect in every way. Her little profile made us dream of what she would look like. We laughed about being classified as a "geriatric pregnancy" because I was 35, but were secretly delighted to have a reason for extra heartbeat scans and sonogram pictures. The other perk of being an "old lady mom" was that the screening they do for health purposes includes a test that tells the baby's gender very early on. I remember getting that call during my planning period at school. The doctor told me that she was a GIRL...my heart couldn't have been more full! I ran to the front office and shouted it with glee at my principal and the secretaries. That night Jack and Sam started talking about their baby *sister* and all of the things they would show her. (This, of course, consisted mostly of the endless parade of trucks that roamed our playroom.)



I loved being pregnant. I loved the weird cravings and new curves that announced every new stage of motherhood. I loved the absolutely endless possibility this new human held. I know it's not everyone's cup of tea, but I loved knowing that my baby was right there with me in a way that they never would be later. And how could I forget? Charlotte was the most active of all of my babies. She kicked so much and so hard that I dubbed her "my little ninja."





In July, we visited Ian's family in Northern Ireland. We met our new niece who was being adopted at age four. It was hard to contain the joy I felt watching her play with Jack and Sam. She added a whole new dynamic to their play, and called the shots, the way I'd imagine any daughter of mine would do! We agonized over the perfect name for our little girl. "Lucy," to keep it short like Jack and Sam's names? "Shiloh," to be unique? "Aoife" ("Ee-fa"), to celebrate her Irish roots? It had to be strong, sweet, and perfect because we were sure she would be all of these things. In the last three days of our visit, I told Ian he had to choose between the two names we had been going back and forth on. I told him his family should be the first to know the name because they missed so many other firsts, being so far away. Ian agreed, and Charlotte Elizabeth Carnaghan finally had a name. As soon as we returned home, I painted it in cheerful letters across her nursery wall.



I spent weeks researching three car seats that would fit into my tiny Hyundai Accent and still keep all three of my babies safe. I made list after list of things to do to prepare for Charlotte's arrival. Every item in my Amazon registry was chosen with immense care, and I spent hours and hours scouring thrift stores and yard sales for everything we wanted for Charlotte. Ian and I planned individual "fun days" with Jack and Sam so they would have ample mommy and daddy alone time before having to share us with a newborn. We talked about our family of five every night at the dinner table, and Jack got into the habit of saying, "the five of us." At work, I built an entire second curriculum unit from scratch (while planning the one I was currently teaching) to ensure my maternity sub would keep my eighth graders on track while I began life with Charlotte. This maternity leave binder was a work of art for an obsessive planner. It was a meticulously created manual for running my classroom, brimming with details, tips, and color coding. It

was a Type A's dream. My school is a lovely community, full of new parents, parents-to-be, and a supportive network of child-loving people. They held a baby shower for three of us who were all due to become parents within a few weeks of one another. I sent my thank yous out the very next day because I knew that, at 37 weeks, my little one could be here at any minute and I didn't want to leave a single chore uncompleted when I left. I was ready for her.





## Just a Heartbeat Scan

On Tuesday afternoon, I had my 37 week check up. I was scheduled to meet with my favorite doctor, and Ian was planning to meet me at the office. Dr. S was always kind about doing a sonogram if a visitor came along with me to an appointment, so I hoped Ian would get a chance to see Charlotte moving around in there before she was actually born. I didn't see him when I arrived in the waiting room, so I whipped out a pile of papers that needed to be graded and lost myself in that for ten minutes. Ian called just as I was being sent to the exam room and said that he would be at least a half hour. "No worries," I told him, "I think today is just a heartbeat scan anyway." He turned around and headed back home to get the boys.

Five minutes later, I heard my little Charlotte's heart beating for the very last time.

"She's a happy girl in there!" my doctor chimed.



## A Bad Feeling

I'm a terrible sleeper. I've been an insomniac since I was very little, so it's no surprise that in late pregnancy I was having trouble sleeping. I hate side sleeping and had to prop pillows around me like a nest to keep me on my left side. But, something felt different about Wednesday night. I couldn't sleep and had this awful feeling of dread that seemed so out of place in the euphoria I had been feeling about my baby, my family, and even work lately. I dismissed it as worry about the details of going on maternity leave, and went to a conference as planned, albeit a bit sleepy, the next day. Something still didn't feel right. On Thursday I wondered if Charlotte was moving enough, and stopped what I was doing several times to count her kicks. She had slowed down a bit in the last week, but everything I read said the baby is so big at this point their hard knocks start to feel a bit more like pings. Each kick count left me thinking, "I *did* feel those, right?" There was real movement in my belly, not just gas. *Right?* That night, I couldn't sleep again and the feeling of dread was heavy enough that I woke Ian up at 3am. "I can't feel her. I'm probably being ridiculous, but I can't sleep." He called the advice line and a nurse took what felt like months to ask the same questions over and over. She finally said that I should go to the hospital for monitoring. I knew I was being ridiculous, and dreaded the moment when the hospital staff would inevitably roll their eyes and call me an overly sensitive mother, but I got dressed, packed papers to grade in the waiting room, and said goodbye to Ian, promising that I'd call when I had news. It was 3:30am and dark as I got into my little Hyundai with three carseats.



## The Fox

Our neighborhood is one of those 1970s planned communities where every house looks like the last one and everyone *else's* lawn is neatly manicured. As I drove past the last Framingham model, a fox darted in front of my car. I slowed to a stop, and it turned to look right at me. Its eyes were glowing in the headlights. She was beautiful. In the past two weeks, I had been subconsciously picking 'fox things' for Charlotte. None of them matched her meticulously coordinated nursery, but I was drawn to them anyway: fox toys, fox burp cloths, little fox shoes. I even put a wooden fox that I bought on the day of her last heartbeat scan on her bedroom door. It just seemed right. For a split second the coincidence of this hit me, and I felt like everything was going to be ok. Maybe they'd even have to induce her early and I could hold her sooner. I sang Beatles songs quietly to Charlotte for the rest of the drive and imagined singing her to sleep once I brought her home with me. The only one I really knew all of the words to was "Blackbird". I read once that Lennon and McCartney wrote this song about a black woman ("a black bird") rising up against injustice during the American Civil Rights movement of the 60s. It was about surviving and thriving after turmoil. I still believed that Charlotte's story could end that way.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night,  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All my life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise*

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night,  
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see  
All my life  
You were only waiting for this moment to be free*

*Blackbird fly, blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night  
Blackbird fly, blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night*

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night,  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All my life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise"*



## Ten Minutes

I walked into labor and delivery and was admitted immediately. Papers would have to wait to be graded. They had me put on a gown and started smoothing the doppler over my stomach. A tall nurse furrowed her brow and said, quickly, "Let's roll on your side, mama." She kept trying. Other side. My breath quickened and I bit my lip nervously as she called my doctor in to do a sonogram. Dr. S, who usually enters our appointments with a few minutes of smiles and catching up, sat down with a quick, "Hi, Heather, we're going to check this out." I knew.

I knew it before she said the words. The sonogram showed the profile of my baby girl but there was no tiny heart fluttering in the middle like there should have been. My little ninja was still.

"I'm so sorry, this is where I should see her heart moving. I'm so sorry."

*She was completely still.*



## Calling Ian

I sat in that hospital bed staring at the clock on the wall until a nurse came in and asked, “Do you have someone you can call, honey?”

I picked up the phone and dialed my parents. “Dad, I need you to go to the house and watch the boys so Ian can come to the hospital.”

“Is she here?!”

My voice got smaller. “No. Can I...please....talk to Mom?”

“Hi Heath, what’s going on?”

There was a long pause as I reminded myself how to breathe, “They can’t find her heartbeat.”

“Oh Heath, I’m on my way, ok? I love you, honey.”

I choked out an “Ok” and hung up.

I stared at my phone. *How am I going to tell Ian that his perfect little baby girl is gone? How can I say those words when they just can’t be real?* I dialed Ian’s cell and he picked up on the first ring. “Ian, my dad is coming to watch the boys. She’s...they couldn’t find her heartbeat.” I sucked in air sharply as I listened to my best friend whimper as he tried to console me.

“We’re going to get through this together, ok? I love you so much. I’ll be there as fast as I can, ok?”

I whispered another “ok” and hung up. It was done and the first wave of “real” crashed over me. I was freezing, my body was shaking and my mind was blank. My breath was coming in anxious spurts of three. In-in-in-out. In-in-in-out. *Now what? Do I just sit here and wait? Can I leave? I want to leave.* I stood up and started putting on my pants in an empty room. I couldn’t help but think that there was no one else here, not even my Charlotte.



## Labor

The nurses wrapped me in warmed blankets and helped me into a wheelchair. They pushed me past the nurse's station where faces looked at me sadly and I looked away, feeling ashamed and embarrassed. They wheeled me into a Labor and Delivery room. It was at the farthest end of the hall. We passed every open door. Happy conversations spilled out and hit me as tears streamed down my face. I remember thinking this was so cruel, like I was somehow starting a punishment for some awful thing I had done.

By 4am, my mom had arrived. She came in with her "strong mother" face, determined to hold herself together so that I could fall apart. This is a look I've seen before. It was there when my brother was hit by a van and we were all frightened he wouldn't make it. It was there when she told us it was time to say goodbye to our beloved grandfather, her daddy, because he didn't have much time left. It has always suited her well, this look. It's like all of the muscles in her brow and jaw tense, locking the tears and hiccups from spilling out into the world. When she wears this face, she has a slight purse to her lips before she says each sentence, and her calculated words come gently and lovingly until you feel a warm calm.

It didn't last very long. I saw her shoes appear below the privacy curtain and saw that familiar locked face as the curtain was pulled aside, but as soon as her lips pursed to say what I know she had rehearsed to herself a hundred times in the car ride here, she broke. My mom, the strongest woman I know, closed her eyes, dropped her head, and sobbed. She hugged me and held my head like I hold my two year old when he cries. I cried because I was seeing my mom like this. I cried because I would never hold my own daughter this way, and I cried because I was terrified of the terrible and endless silence I knew was waiting for me at the end of this labor.

When Ian arrived shortly after, he had tears in his eyes. I had never seen my husband cry before. It was alarming. When your world has been turned upside down, reality comes in flashes, like looking out of a speeding subway window. For a split second you catch a glimpse of the real world before plunging back into the dimness of a tunnel. Ian's tears jolted me to reality, if only for a few seconds, and I realized there was nothing I could do. My doctor explained that they would induce labor with a small pill every two hours and that I could choose to have an epidural if I wished, then her shift ended. Ian held my hand and kept repeating, "We will get through this together." What he meant was "I'll carry you, I'll push you, I'll hear you, I'll love you, even when you don't think you want me to."

My mother had invited a chaplain to say a prayer for Charlotte. She was an older woman with a kind face, but a rather aloof disposition. She asked about the baby and we explained that her name was Charlotte Elizabeth. After a conversation full of awkward lulls, she asked to pray with us and repeatedly called the baby a "he". Each time I heard this I looked up in disgust, but she didn't see me because her head was bowed. She left, wishing us future children, which felt like further assault on Charlotte's memory.

Labor was long, much longer than it had been with my boys. After not sleeping for two nights, earth shattering news, and crying through the pain of loss and twenty-five hours of uncomfortable contractions, I was exhausted. Everything about this experience went against my grain. I am rarely sad or without a plan, so spinning out of control and feeling a depth of despair that I couldn't even articulate had drained everything out of me. The nurse gave me a pill to sleep and I drifted off, dreaming of my baby. The dreams came in spurts since the contractions woke me up every few minutes. In my dreams, Charlotte was just out of my reach or falling. She was on the other side of door that I couldn't unlock or was lost in a crowded place. With every contraction, my dreams became more vivid and awful. I wanted to cry out when I was jolted awake by the pain in my stomach, but didn't have enough energy to do it.

A new doctor came into the room and explained that they were going to give me Pitocin to strengthen the contractions, and that now was when I needed to tell her if I wanted an epidural. She smacked her gum, almost as if annoyed at me, as I told her "no". I didn't tell her I needed to feel every second of my baby girl's delivery. I needed to feel the last seconds she was inside me, and I needed to be alert and able to hold her because I knew it wouldn't last long. I started crying again. She kept chewing her gum and said, "The contractions are going to get a lot stronger," then abruptly left.

The contractions started to come in regular waves and the gum-chomping doctor was not kidding, they got a lot stronger. The nurse gave me a medication that was supposed to help with the pain, but also make me rest. The effect was like falling into the deepest, blackest sleep you have ever experienced, then opening your eyes to searing pain and blinding light like a Mac truck hurtling at you head-on. I moaned in pain over and over. Ian ran to get the doctor when he could no longer take the sounds. I wanted to reassure Ian that he wouldn't lose both of us, but nothing seemed impossible anymore. My water had broken and I was breathing heavily, knowing that it would not be much longer. The gum chewer came in and asked if I felt ready to push. I did. I wanted to hold Charlotte so desperately. These last 27 hours were the worst in my life, and I wanted it to be over. But... I didn't. I didn't want to say goodbye and admit that my baby girl was really gone. I pushed. I screamed and pushed. I felt her moving down through my body. I felt her head crown and her shoulders tear through me. It felt like fire, but I told myself that it was for her. I could tell that she was just one push from leaving me, and the finality of that made me panic. My mouth went completely dry and I couldn't breathe. I begged for water, and for the nurses to let go of my legs. My mom gave me water and I whispered weakly, "I'm not strong enough for this." I didn't mean the last push. I meant for everything - and the nothing - that I knew would come after it.

At 7:23am, my long awaited baby girl was born.



## Silence

At 7:24am, the whole world went silent.

Perhaps it was only a second, but inside that second felt like a million years. Everything was still and quiet. My baby girl was still and quiet. A sound erupted that I didn't recognize as myself. A guttural wail. I covered my face because I wanted just one more minute of not seeing what I was about to see.

The room stayed silent. The nurses didn't talk as they quickly wiped Charlotte off and wrapped her in a pink blanket. The only crying that could be heard was from me and my family. They handed the small, lifeless bundle to me. She was still warm from being inside me, and I could almost imagine her opening her eyes as I brushed the soft skin of her cheeks and touched her perfect little nose. I cupped her head in my hand and kissed her forehead. I held her tiny hand with five delicate little fingers and closed my eyes, wishing that my love for this perfect baby was enough to bring her back to me. My mother snapped a picture of this moment. I remember thinking how wildly inappropriate and invasive that flash felt, and yet it is the only picture I will ever have of me with my daughter.





## Saying Goodbye to a Whole Life

Grief is often compared to a shipwreck. Being told that there was no heartbeat was an unexpected storm that forced my well-ordered ship into uncharted territory. Going through labor and knowing that there was no baby coming home with me splintered my boat, and the silence of her birth sent me sprawling overboard without a lifejacket. The hour that we held Charlotte's body felt like drowning. It had that other-worldly quality of being underwater. In my memory, there are only distorted shapes in the space beyond her little face. The sounds of the nurses and machines were muffled and far away, and I was sure I would never be able to breathe a full breath again.

"I think it is time." What Ian didn't say was that Charlotte's body had been deteriorating. No one prepared us for this. She had grown cold in the minutes after delivery and the eerie purple tone of a corpse had replaced the almost living red of her just-birthered skin. Her unblemished face was still coated in the cheesy white vernix of a newborn, but her eyes were closed and puffy like the soft pillow of a blister. The skin on her belly, back and forearms was beginning to tear and reveal the raw redness underneath. Ian tried to adjust the falling blanket as he lifted her out of my arms, then quickly stopped, horrified that it had pulled more of her skin away. He whispered it again, "I think we need to say goodbye now, Heath."

A nurse took Charlotte's body from Ian and was escorted to the morgue by a police officer.

She was gone.

**Heather McRae Carnaghan**  
October 22 at 1:33pm · 🌐

On Saturday, October 21, we lost our precious baby girl, Charlotte Elizabeth Carnaghan.

She was 5 pounds 11 ounces and 18 inches long, but held so much more than that tiny body might suggest. As we held her for that hour, we said goodbye to an entire life of hours that we had been promised together. We will never know her eye color or what her voice sounds like, never know each freckle and curve like a parent does after that first bath, or whether she inherited Ian's chocolate addiction like Sam, but we do know that our family will never quite be complete without her.

Our hearts were shattered yesterday and the pieces will never fit back together quite the same way.

Please be patient with us as we take time to grieve and heal. More than anything, we need time with our family to adjust to a world that has been turned upside down.

-Heather and Ian

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## A College Fund for a Funeral

Each moment felt like a trauma in those first two days. Being told that there was no heartbeat. Labor. The silence. These were the big things that everyone around us sympathized with, but there were plenty of “small things” that knocked us off of our feet. The pain of hearing platitudes like “God needed one more flower for His garden.” The doctor rolling her eyes when I said that I wanted to hold my baby while she was warm instead of being stitched up right away. The long, pity-filled looks by nurses behind high counters. The unceremonious bag that held all that we had left of her. The counselor who gave us “options” for handling our baby’s body. Opening the hospital bag, full of colorful baby clothes and nursing gear. Signing papers to release our baby’s body to the crematorium. Being moved to a new room with no crib. Seeing a friend’s new baby announcement. Deleting the baby milestones app from my phone.

Most of all, it was alarming to abruptly adjust to a whole new vocabulary. *Someday* was replaced with *never*. *Newborn* was replaced by *stillborn*. *Joy* was replaced by *grief*, and *birth* was replaced by *death*. My parents had set aside some money to begin Charlotte’s college fund. I almost laughed at the twisted absurdity of this awful “new normal” when my mother said that we could use that money for Charlotte’s cremation and funeral. *Up* was *down*, and absolutely nothing was right.



## Alone in a Waiting Room

I was discharged less than twelve hours after Charlotte's birth. They gave me a bag of medical supplies for the post-partum bleeding and told me to ease into a wheelchair that had an icepack on the seat. A young man wheeled me past an impossibly long station full of sad-faced nurses who didn't know what to say. One awkwardly said, "good luck" and then grimaced at her own mistake. My vision was so blurred by tears that I wasn't certain who else we passed on our way downstairs. Shock gives you tunnel vision. Your eyes only allow you to see just enough so that you don't hit the iceberg. When the wheelchair stopped moving, I saw linoleum and long rows of chairs. We were in a waiting room, my favorite place.

I vaguely heard Ian say that he would get the car and be right back, then watched as he hurried out of the glass doors and disappeared into the parking garage. My body literally ached at the thought of not seeing her again. I heaved and sobbed, alone in the middle of the hospital lobby. I was adrift and couldn't see land. People passed and stared, but no one dared to stop. For the second time in this terrible day, there was silence all around me. A priest walked by in his starched collar. My faith has always been like a glacier on the edge of the ocean, eroding and ready to calve. When the priest glanced in my direction, noticed my anguish, and walked on, that glacier finally split. I shed the last of my faith in the God I had learned about as a child. Losing Charlotte changed who I was, who I would be, and what I believed. My arms and my heart felt utterly empty.

I shuffled stiffly to the car, clutching my bag of pads with white knuckles, as I saw Ian pull up in the old Cadillac that used to belong to my grandfather. I climbed into the passenger seat and winced in pain as I sat down on swollen flesh and stitches. When the door closed, I crumpled forward into the medical bag and sobbed. We were leaving, and the healthy baby girl we had waited nine eager months for was in the morgue. Ian drove away from the hospital slowly and held my hand tightly the whole ride home.



## Home Without Her

Sometimes a season starts abruptly. This fall was like that. In the short time between my 3am drive to the hospital and returning to our home, childless, summer weather had given way to fall. It was chilly, and leaves had fallen all over the yard. Ian turned off the engine and I gazed out at an often overlooked patch of grass on the side of our house. There, in the middle of fallen leaves, were five perfect crocus flowers. One for each member of our family. I have never had crocus in my yard before, but have always loved them. They are a sign of spring, and only bloom for a very short time. I picked the smallest flower and brought it inside with me to press. It was an ephemeral symbol of Charlotte and a reminder that our lives will, somehow, go on.



Being home was a relief and a torment all at once. We curled up into our own bed and tried to make sense of what had happened in the last 24 hours. It was comforting to lay on familiar pillows and be granted time alone, away from nurses, visitors, and beeping machines. The old fashioned wicker bassinet that held three generations of babies already, stood empty next to my bed as we talked. The light in Charlotte's nursery stayed off, and the outfit I had picked to bring her home in remained folded and untouched in my hospital bag. Every corner of our house had painful reminders of her absence. Baby shower cards full of hopeful messages. A blanket made just for her. Bottles and a breast pump, cleaned and ready for midnight feedings.



## Telling Jack

We spent the next day huddled inside this cocoon of grief before deciding that the house was simply too silent without Jack and Sam to fill it with noise. The boys had been staying at my brother's house, so we called Uncle Chris and asked him to bring them home. As soon as the car pulled up, Jack unbuckled himself, lept out and came bouncing to the front door. He was excited and literally jumping up and down as he asked, "Where is baby Charlotte!" His little face scanned the room eagerly and then took in the tears running down both of our faces.

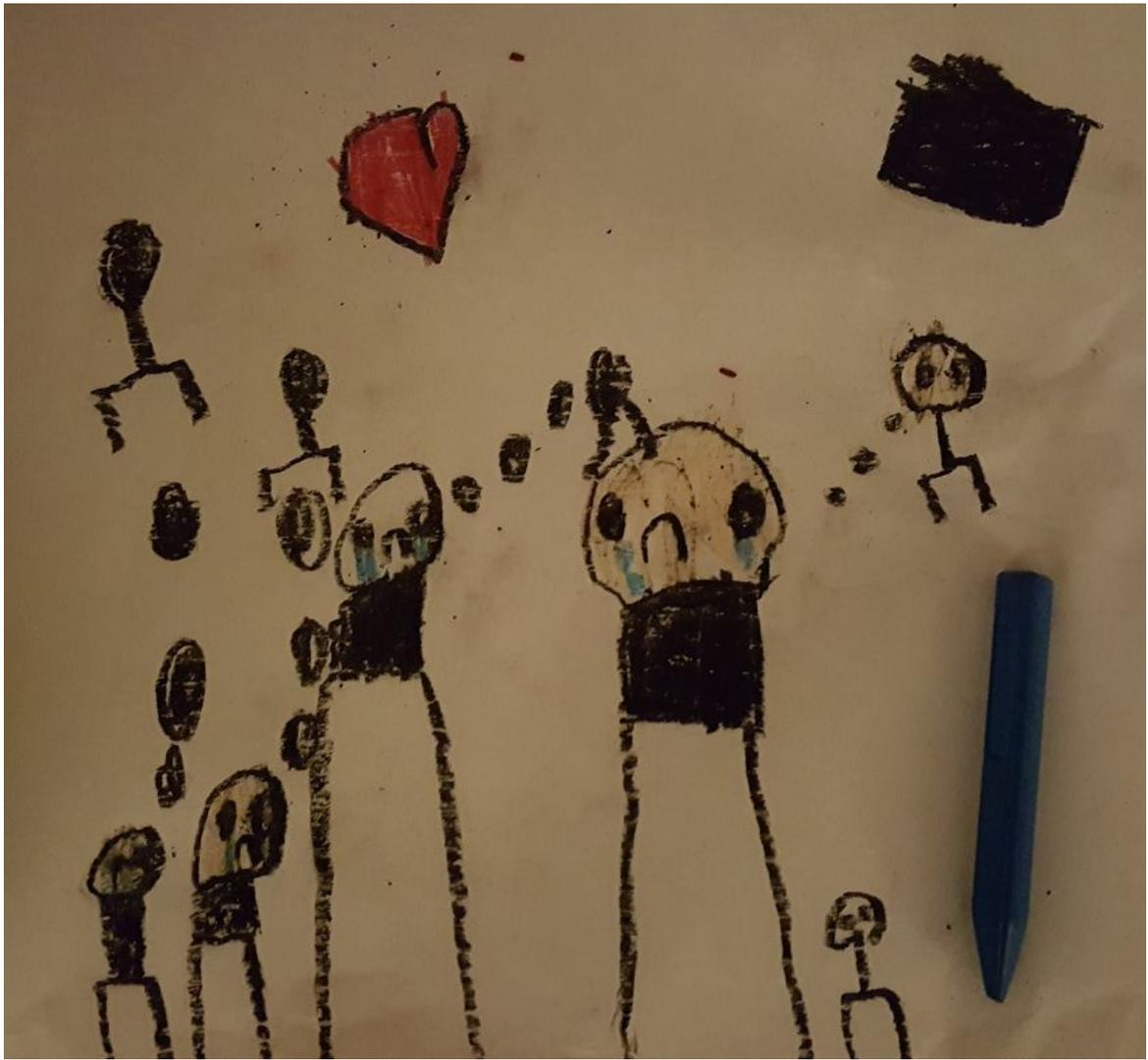
"We need to talk about that as a family, honey." I pulled him into my lap on the floor and explained slowly, "The doctors couldn't find Charlotte's heartbeat when mommy visited the hospital." Jack looked up at me with big eyes and a furrowed brow. "Do you know what that means, Jack?"

"She died?" He shrieked. Jack wailed, "Noooooo!" and ran for the front door. He threw it open and sprinted outside.

I shoved Ian, "You have to get him!" Immediately I had feared that my son would run into the street and I would lose another child. I was panicked, and tore a stitch as I tried to get up too quickly. There was blood on the wood floor and I wiped it away, embarrassed and sore, as Ian carried our five year old back inside and cradled him like an infant in his lap.

Jack was sobbing. We didn't think he'd even understand, but he got it so very deeply. He was angry that we had broken our promise to give him a little sister, and he was horrified that a baby could die. Most of all, he was sad that he would never know Charlotte. "We don't even know her favorite color or what she'll choose to be when she grows up. I really, really wanted her, Mommy."

"We did too, Jack. We really, really wanted her too."



*"See Mommy and Daddy and me and Sam? We are crying and thinking about Charlotte." -Jack*



## Postpartum Without the Baby

Postpartum without a baby feels like a cruel joke. As if losing your sweet baby and grieving an entire lifetime of cuddles, firsts, and giggles wasn't enough, your body doesn't seem to get the memo that she is gone. Those first days were a fog, and I felt nothing but pain.

I cried until I felt empty. I collapsed from exhaustion into a pillow wet with tears and woke up in the night expecting to find her there, only to hear silence and see the bassinet without her in it next to my bed. I had horrific flashbacks of labor that I never experienced with my previous pregnancies. The daytime worry about my surviving children turned into torturous dreams of losing them in a thousand ways. Stitches made it impossible to move, when all I wanted to do was run away from this nightmare I seemed to be living in.

The incisions and uterine cramps ached almost as much as my heart. After several days, I had a horrible pain in my left side. I doubled over and laid on the floor clutching my stomach in agony. I felt a queasy, tearing sensation under my left rib and felt a gush of blood fill my adult diaper and begin to run down my leg. My body had passed a two inch piece of leftover placenta. As I searched for a heating pad, I found the digital pregnancy test that had announced Charlotte's surprise. The display still read "pregnant". Could a plastic pee stick actually last longer than my daughter's life? It occurred to me that I had long since passed my breaking point, and was in a whole new territory of low. Nothing made sense, everything hurt, and it was impossible to see past the moment I was stuck in.

My breasts had filled with milk for the baby I ached for. They leaked in the shower as I sobbed hysterically. They became engorged, solid and sore, wanting her suck as desperately as I did. I expressed Charlotte's milk into the sink unceremoniously, washing it down with tears and anger. Periodically I would catch my reflection in the mirror and weep for the shrinking belly and fading stretch marks that seemed like the only physical sign left that she had been a part of me.

I sat at the computer to try and distract myself with something other than grief. The first email was from Babycenter telling me what my baby would look like at 38 weeks. "Your baby has a firm grasp – you'll feel it when you hold her hand for the first time!" I slammed the laptop shut.

The first weeks postpartum without your baby is a depth of pain and sorrow that no one can understand until they have been there.

From: Heather Carnaghan  
Sent: 10/24/2017 8:01 AM EDT  
To: Dr.S DO, D.O.  
Subject: Non-Urgent Medical Question

Hi Dr.S,

I have a few questions about what happens now. Can you help me with them?

1- My milk is coming in (really heavily). I've been expressing as little as I can to stop engorgement and icing my chest for some relief. Is there anything that I can do to dry up the milk supply?

2- I had my 38 week appointment scheduled with Dr.F today (10/24). I am going to miss it. I am just not ready to be in the building yet. I know I will need to come in at some point. When should that be? And may I make the appointment with you specifically? I don't know if I can tell this story to another doctor yet.

3-Will we ever know what caused this? A part of me never wants to know because I already look at everything I did during the pregnancy and assign blame, but another part needs to understand what happened and if she suffered. I know that I will want to try again someday, but I can't if it might mean putting another baby through that.

Please remember Charlotte. You were one of the few people in the whole world who got to meet her and hear her little heart beating. A week ago today was the last time we heard it together. Thank you for being the one to tell me that it had stopped. That sounds awful, but it meant a lot that it was you because you knew her and cared.

Heather

From: Dr.S DO, D.O  
Sent: 10/24/2017 8:03 AM EDT  
To: .Heather Carnaghan  
Subject: RE: Non-Urgent Medical Question

Hi Heather,

I've been wanting to contact you, but also want to give you some space.

For your milk, wear a tight fitting sports bra ALL the time, even at night. Ice as needed. Also try some pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) or benadryl.

You can come in when you're ready. I'd recommend in 2-3 weeks. You still have an appointment with me on 10/31. If you'd like to come in that day, you may. If not, just call the office to reschedule.

Please don't blame yourself. I've been over everything again and again thinking how this could have been prevented. But you were an ideal patient and we did everything right. You were low risk for this. I do not believe that she suffered. She may have gotten tangled in her cord which was no longer obvious at delivery. It'd didn't seem that you had an infection. All of the testing I

did in the hospital was normal except for proof of a past infection to parvovirus, or "slapped cheek disease". You've probably been exposed to this in your job or from your boys. It didn't appear to be a recent infection, but could've happened earlier in the pregnancy. You never reported an illness or fever to me, which makes me think it may have been prior to the pregnancy.

Unfortunately, 5% of the time we don't have an explanation. Your chances are increased of it happening again but only 1.8 out of 1000. We would do intensive monitoring and potentially induce you early.

Now, please allow yourself to grieve so that you can heal. You are more than welcome to talk to a counselor if you decide to do so. Here are some websites that may be helpful:

[Compassionatefriends.org](http://Compassionatefriends.org)

[Nationalshare.org](http://Nationalshare.org)

[Hopeafterloss.org](http://Hopeafterloss.org)

I will remember Charlotte. And I will continue to pray for her and for you.

Please don't hesitate to contact me for anything.



## Signs, Symbols, and Foxes

There is a stage of grief that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, widely accepted as the guru of grief, calls “Dialogue and Bargaining.” In this stage, the bereaved wishes to reach out and tell their story in an effort to try to figure it out for themselves. I hit this stage hard. I needed to tell the story over and over in order to believe it.

My sister-in-law was visiting for the first time since losing Charlotte, and I needed to talk to her about it. She was a new mom, and the only person in my immediate family who I felt would understand the frustrations of recovering my postpartum body. When I pulled her into a quiet room, I started from the beginning, “As I drove to the hospital, a fox darted in front of my car. I slowed to a stop and it turned to look right at me. Its eyes were glowing in the headlights.”

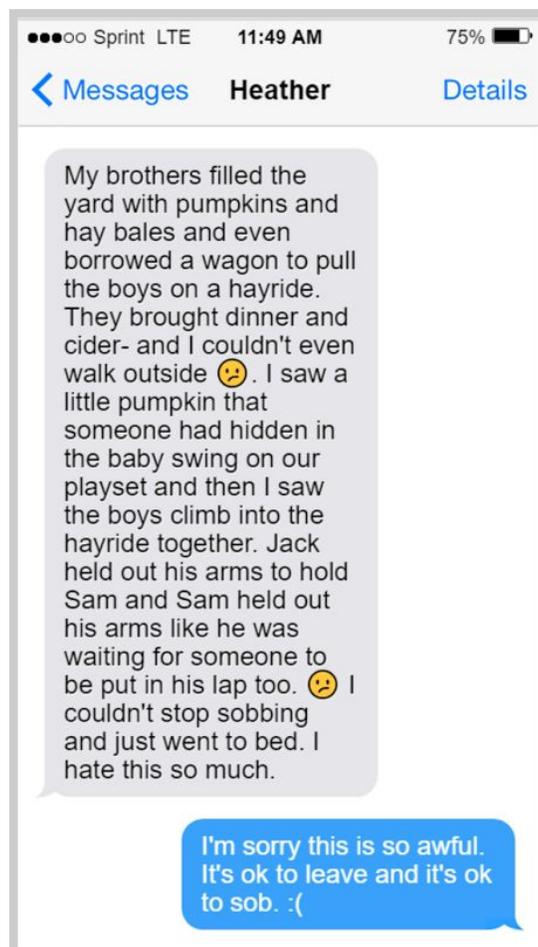
She gasped, “We had a weird fox incident with Jack and Sam this weekend too!” They had a little fox that hid under their deck periodically, but usually ran away when they spotted her. This time the fox stayed. When they called Jack to go see her, she walked into the woods but let them slowly come closer, and stared at them with its eyes shining.

We both cried quietly for a while, knowing that this was a sign of Charlotte that we all needed. We told my mom, and she started crying harder than I had expected. She whispered that she and my dad had a similar experience on an early morning walk the day before I called them about Charlotte. A beautiful fox crossed in front of them. “I’ve never seen a fox in the city like that, Heath.”



## Sucker Punches

I have gotten really good at spotting it. It's always on a day that you feel like you've got things together. You visit the Dunkin Donuts drive thru or drop your kids off at school by yourself because you're feeling stronger than the day before. It starts as a flicker of recognition, "Oh, it's you!" Then a glance at my belly and a wide grin. *No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...Here it comes.* Jovially, they ask, "Did you have the baby?" My body tenses, I shake my head no...and then yes. I squeak, "Yes. Yes, but..." and I can't finish. "You look great!" they inevitably respond, not realizing that my brain has switched into fight or flight mode. I'm hyperventilating and wishing with every piece of my soul that I still had that floppy postpartum belly, or a mean C-Section scar, or ugly stretch marks, any physical proof that she was there. She existed. She was alive for those nine beautiful months. I race for the nearest locking door, and yet another T-shirt becomes a handkerchief.





My mom had the awful task of identifying Charlotte's body at the funeral home in the foggy days after I had given birth to her. My brother and father joined her for support. The funeral director had wrapped my baby in a blanket, and put a tiny hat on her "so that she wouldn't be cold." Mom asked them to take handprints and footprints for us, and then gave Charlotte her very last kiss goodbye. No one should be able to count the number of kisses they have received in their lifetime. Charlotte's could be counted on one perfect little hand.

When my mom returned a week later to pick up Charlotte's ashes, an older lady came to the door in tears and already knew who she was. Through tears, she told my mother that she was a grandmother as well, and that this preparation was especially hard for her family. She had stayed with Charlotte the whole time, talking to her and honoring her as a person, albeit one with so little time here.

My mom handed me four sheets of paper with my little girl's tiny handprints and footprints. One looked like a joyfully inked finger painting, the kind a preschool teacher makes even sweeter by pressing those wiggling, eager, living fingers onto the page in the shape of a flower. *A crocus, if you look closely.*

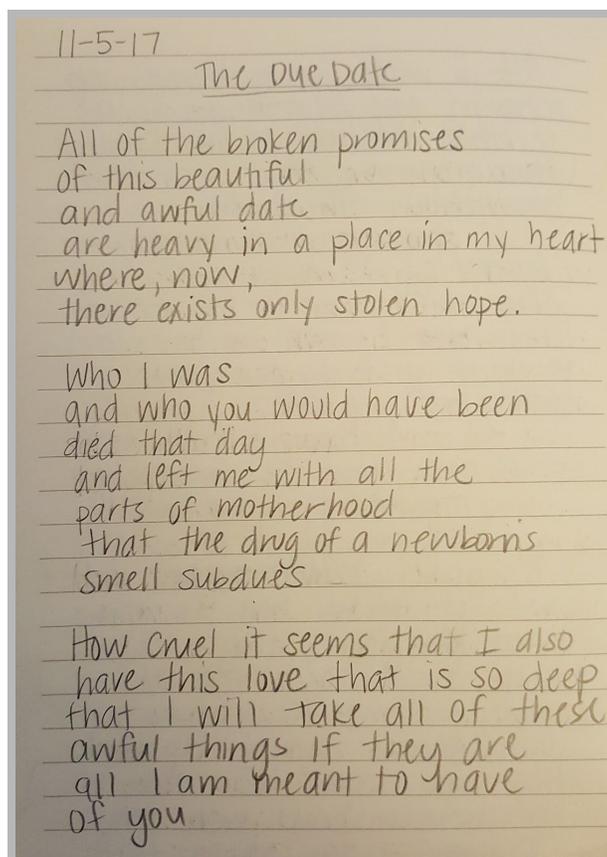
Sucker punches. They come out of nowhere and knock the wind right out of you.



## November 5

Charlotte's due date was two weeks after her death. It was a day that I had eagerly waited nine months for. I took a bath and let my ears slip below the surface of the water. I heard muffled sounds from the rest of the world, but my own heartbeat and whimpers filled the space and were amplified by that wet cocoon. I closed my eyes and wished, prayed, begged that I would wake up and she would still be kicking inside me. I would go through a thousand labors if it would bring Charlotte back.

Somehow everything felt so wrong without her, not just her untouched crib, but every swing in the park, every silent moment. My heart felt bruised. Jack's drawings and all our family pictures had tragic holes where one of us was missing. I saw it in everything. She was supposed to be here today. Today, Charlotte was supposed to be in my arms. Our adventure was supposed to begin *today*. Some tiny, illogical part of me had gone to sleep the night before clinging to that little shred of hope that the magic of her due date would change things somehow, or that I would wake up with some new understanding. All I woke up with was an ache in my heart and a terrible feeling of loss. Only this morning that loss felt complete. Absolute. I missed her so much. I missed me, too, because I knew that who I was before this was just as completely gone as she was.





## Epilogue

You might not imagine it, but grief over losing a baby opens doors to new friendships. You gain lifelong membership into a club you never wanted to be a part of, but can't live without. Mothers, desperate for someone to understand their story, reach out to one another in online chat rooms, support groups, and through friends-of-friends. When I posted my initial message on Facebook, an old friend from elementary school contacted me to share her story. She lost her sweet baby boy, Tikvah, when she was almost nine months pregnant as well. We shared stories of our pregnancies and losses, and she sent messages to comfort me, particularly on days she knew would be difficult: stormy weather days, the first doctor's appointment after, Charlotte's due date, Thanksgiving. It's strange to think that a few heartfelt words can save your life, but words were the lifeline that pulled me out of the darkest place I have ever visited.



**Heather McRae Carnaghan** 12 mins · 

Yesterday Charlotte would have been one month old.

In French, you don't say, "I miss you", you say "tu me manques" which means "you are missing from me". That seems more accurate somehow. Missing Charlotte is a physical ache, deep in my chest, that bends my spine and burdens every step.

One month without her has taught me that this ache of grief will always exist, but so will a new part of me: a gratitude that is deeper than I knew before. This Thanksgiving, I will mourn the greatest loss I have experienced, but I will be forever grateful for the nine beautiful months that I carried her and dreamed of a lifetime of our adventures together. When it hurts the most, I try to remember that the only thing my baby girl ever knew of this world was warmth and unconditional love.

I am also overwhelmed with gratitude for the many hands that have reached out to hold me up. Right now the weight of all of the things that I will miss - that first gassy smile, the heat of her sleeping on my shoulder, the bond of nursing, that new baby smell, holding her tiny hand, that loving gaze at her big brothers, and a lifetime of her laughter - is too heavy for me to carry alone. I am not used to being the "helped" and not the "helper", but so many people have shown kindness to us in ways that we can never repay. It is humbling. We are so very thankful for your love.

I will always remember and love Charlotte. I will talk about her, even if it makes others uncomfortable or brings a tear back to my eye. She was born still, but she was still...born. I love her with as much depth as I love Jack and Sam (and we all know that I never stop talking about them). This Thanksgiving, I am thankful to have loved and be loved so very deeply.

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Grieving for your child feels as if you have stumbled and dropped out of reality altogether; it's something you look in on through a foggy window in a waiting room. Waiting for your name to be called. Waiting for someone to tell you it was a sick joke or a bad dream, or that there is something that can be done to change it. Waiting is not my strength. It makes me uncomfortable in a deep and painful way that

is hard to explain. It's like a terrible limbo in which you have no control. This new "waiting" is more uncomfortable than ever. I can't stop waiting for the child I know can never come back. So, I wait for a fox sighting or a crocus. I wait for a rustle in the trees that makes me look up, or a flock of birds taking flight across the lake. I wait for a sign that life goes on in a deeper, raw-love kind of way, and that she is still somehow a part of it. She lived so little, but she taught me so much.

*I'll always be waiting for Charlotte.*