

# Passages to Epiphany

Journeys of discovery and delight

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Foreword by Jennifer Hough



# *Passages to Epiphany*

**A Collection of Short Stories By Susan Crossman**

## *Charlie's Choice*

Charlie looked up at the cloudless blue sky above her head and stretched her arms up to their limit, thankful for another peaceful day. She wiggled her ankles from side to side to dig her bare feet deeper into the cool sand of spring and stood there for a moment, breathing in the fishy smell of the rippling lake water. She was a little lonely, truth be told, a little sad.

A gentle whine interrupted Charlie's thoughts and she looked down at the sodden black lab at her side.

"Oh Trooper, am I forgetting you?" she asked. The dog cocked his head and looked expectantly up at her, his tongue hanging out of a mouth that was ringed with sand. He was still panting from his last chase in the lake and he was eager for more.

Charlie picked up the thick black stick at her feet and flung it back into the water, laboring a little to send it farther this time, and the lab immediately rocketed out into the water to fetch it. Trooper could play stick for hours.

Later they would sit on Charlie's beachfront porch and watch the clouds and gulls get ready for sunset, and later still they would ignore the sand between their toes as they drifted off to sleep in

Charlie's antique four-poster. They would have made new memories like the old ones and the sun would rise again.

But Charlie had other things on her mind today and lovely as tired dogs and sandy sheets were, she needed to focus on her future. Unmarried at 40 and childless, she belonged to that unsung army of women who have reached a stage in life where they understand, suddenly and for all time -- sooner than others perhaps -- that they are Alone.

The anguish and chaos of tidying away the evidence of her parents' lives had been hard on Charlie and it seemed like just a heartbeat since they had passed out of her life. There had been bills to pay and accounts to close, property to sell and furniture to disperse. Like so many other orphaned adults, she had held on to far too many of her parents' possessions, hoping to stay connected to their memories through the things they had loved best.

Charlie's parents had not been wealthy people and it wasn't in the family way to talk about money. But decades ago they had bought a little beachfront house some miles west of Port Stanley, Ontario, and it had given them unending delight. The house was Charlie's now.

"Trooper, sit," she said. Trooper looked up at his mistress quizzically and pranced a little before parking his rear on the water-spotted sand. "I need to talk to you," Charlie said.

Trooper looked at Charlie and then at the stick. He loved Charlie whole-heartedly and it didn't matter to him that she sometimes ate ice cream right out of the container, or failed to clean up the dinner dishes. He didn't notice that the zipper on her size 12 trousers was in danger of splitting or that gray roots sometimes shone through the pretty ginger colour of her hair. She gave a good scratch, that woman. He was a happy dog.

"We need to make a decision," Charlie was saying. She felt brave and scared, all at the same time. Trooper listened attentively.

"I've got a job offer, Trooper," she began. "My boss thinks I'm a shoe-in for one of the branch manager's jobs that's just opened up in Toronto. It would be a huge promotion."

Trooper panted and waited.

"It would be awfully exciting," she said. We'd finally get to break out of small town life. That's what I've always wanted, isn't it?

Trooper didn't know. And now, perched on the edge of the biggest decision of her life, neither did Charlie. She had been finishing her degree in finance when she had fallen in love with the carefree Jake Brissom, a divorced man seven years older than her, and one whose two children arrived at his home every other weekend for their legal allotment of time with their father. They were both under the age of seven and initially Jake had said he was concerned about moving a woman into their lives so soon after the divorce.

A few years later he had said he was worried about commitment. Charlie had invested five years of her life with Jake and his family before deciding she either had to move in with the man or move on. Having been stung once in marriage, Jake had explained, he just couldn't take another chance.

It took all Charlie's courage to break away from him -- after all, she loved him -- but this was about pride and she wanted more from a relationship than Jake was offering. Six months later, she cried for hours when she found out he was engaged to that awful Sarah Blunden who worked at the St. Thomas YMCA.

Meanwhile, Charlie's best friend Marsha Jones had landed a job as a lawyer in a downtown Toronto law firm, and she had swept into big city life with passion and verve. Charlie enviously listened to Marsha's news about the concerts, restaurants and fitness clubs that filled her days, and the succession of men rotating through Marsha's life had been impressive. Eventually Marsha married and brought two sweet little children into a life of comfort.

Almost as soon as Jake withered off her horizon, Charlie's mother had been diagnosed with the lingering intestinal disease that eventually extinguished her. Before Charlie really had the energy to take wing and fly to Toronto -- where she had always thought she should be living -- she thrust herself into the role of caregiver and spent all her available time driving her mother to doctors' appointments or helping keep her parent's bungalow clean and neat. She had made meals for her parents and tended their garden. She had fussed over her father's failing eyesight and completed his tax returns.

And although she was a willing worker in the project, Charlie thought with some regret about the brilliant future she had always wanted, one that would take her away from London and St. Thomas and their ebbing main streets, and off to a world of bustle and commerce. Instead of working diligently at a London bank and going to bed early every Friday night, maybe she could be at the helm of a busy Toronto bank branch and wearing saucy little dresses to swanky parties. Or maybe not. But it might be nice to have that choice.

No, Charlie hadn't planned to devote 10 years of her life to her parents' needs but like most things in life, days bled into weeks and weeks collected into months and eventually, like a raindrop threading its way through streams and creeks, lakes and rivers, Charlie floated her way to a distant ocean of life a decade beyond her starting point. Her mother's end had been an easy one, and Charlie felt blessed to have been there for it. She was exhausted.

Charlie might have set off for Toronto at that point to bring a brilliant future to life in that mysterious world of glass towers and littered streets, but she had chosen to stay: her father had needed her help transitioning to a smaller life in an empty house. Three lonely New Year's Eves passed her by. With her father's death, Charlie had been just too worn out to

think about making any changes. In fact, she had decided she didn't need to. She was too old for a big city life now.

All those years of patient caretaking, those years of watching hope for her future dim one tiny mirage at a time, they'd all been worth it, in a sad way, and she had her cottage on the beach as compensation. Why did the district manager of her bank have to ruin it all now by pushing her towards the branch manager's job that had cropped up in an area of Toronto they called "The Beach?" Charlie liked the sound of that name -- it felt like home. But she already had a home.

"You're perfect for the job, Charlie," Rick had told her, his excitement finding no answering resonance in her heart. Rick was on his second marriage and he seemed stained by optimism.

Charlie wasn't so sure she wanted a perfect job in the City anymore. She already managed a successful bank branch half an hour away in London. Her successes there had often brought her to the attention of that nebulous place they call Head Office. She had finally succeeded in organizing her life so that everything was predictable and safe. Toronto was full of nightmare traffic problems and random murders -- how could anyone plan a decent life in a city like that?

No, Charlie was beyond adventure now, beyond the silvery reach of big dreams and star-struck hopes for a brighter tomorrow. She was firmly entrenched in a predictable life in a relatively safe community. She had security now. Wasn't that enough?

Well, wasn't it?

A little flicker of curiosity scintillated down Charlie's backbone and Marsha's excited urging prompted her to take a look at what she was passing up.

“Come for a weekend at least,” Marsha had said on the phone the night before. “We’ll have a blast!”

Charlie felt she was too old to use words like “blast.” But she wasn’t yet too old for a weekend in the City and she would like to see Marsha and her family again. Charlie packed a bag, dropped Trooper off at her cousin’s house in Iona Station and took a deep breath.

She took the train to Toronto so she wouldn’t have to worry about dangerous items flying off trucks on the highway. She had bought a personal safety alarm and she had stashed her money securely around her waist in a money belt in case she was robbed as she made her way to Marsha’s office.

She might be a small-town girl at heart but she was no fool. As the train made its way into the downtown core, Charlie marveled at how big the buildings were – and how they seemed to be crammed into as little space as possible. She had been to Toronto several years earlier – or was it a decade ago? – and she had forgotten how busy it was.

“Too many people,” she sniffed. Her heart beat faster.

The train station was packed with people who all seemed in a terrible hurry to get somewhere else but Charlie was in no hurry at all. She wasn’t due to meet Marsha for hours yet.

“Why can’t they all just relax?” she wondered, wrapping her best spring jacket more tightly around her for comfort. She noticed most of the women were wearing spiky heels and she was regretting her sensible choice of shoes.

Charlie’s new jeans and sweater, which had seemed so practical in the Walmart dressing room, now felt uncomfortable next to her skin as she noticed the nice suits and skimpy skirts of the women who were racing through the station with so much certainty.

Marsha had given Charlie detailed directions on how to get to her office building through the underground tunnels that led from Union Station. She was headed towards a building called “First Canadian Place.” Navigating her way through the maze of shopping opportunities and rushing people was a nightmare but she saw some gorgeous clothes she might like to try on. Later, maybe. Another time. Another year. There would be another opportunity. Wouldn’t there?

Wouldn’t there?

Charlie stopped in front of a brilliantly lit store window and gazed at the smart gray suits on the mannequins before her. Five gray suits, each one unique, were all accessorized with pretty blouses and sparkling jewelry. Off to the side was one mannequin in a daring red suit that had been paired with a tight black scoop-neck camisole. It looked fresh and exciting by comparison. Even though London had large stores and affluent shoppers, Charlie had always thought it was a city that actually had very little to offer. Very little choice. Even as the thought formed in her head, Charlie realized the words applied to almost everything in her life right now: So little choice.

She stood and stared at the red suit for a long time, frowning slightly and trying to look more worldly than she felt. Finally, she gathered up her courage and walked into the store, “just to look” she told herself. Clothes had never seemed important to her before.

An eager young salesgirl, focused on a new commission, smiled brightly and offered to help.

“No thanks, just looking,” Charlie said casually. Just looking, she thought. Always looking. Always looking after someone or looking behind at sad memories. The salesgirl was dressed in a snug brown pencil skirt and a cream-coloured Lycra top. She wore four-inch heels and Charlie wondered how

she could stand all day without toppling over. The shoes made Charlie nervous. The sales girl smiled and swept an appraising glance Charlie's way.

"You'd look good in green," she said, pointing to a rack in the middle of the store. Charlie liked green and went over to look. The salesgirl was too pretty and too skinny, she thought, although the green had been a good suggestion.

The rack held a row of beautiful Kelly green skirts and jackets and Charlie knew she would never have the nerve to try any of them on. Besides, she didn't really need new clothes. Looking was a good idea, though – she had to do something with her time. She thought about how even being in Toronto right now felt like a dramatic departure from Reality. Her life had become entirely predictable and there was never any variation in it, from the bowl of Corn Flakes she ate every morning for breakfast to the 28-minute route she took every day to work.

Charlie liked predictability. And as she looked at the beautiful green suits on the rack in a well-lit store in a strange city, it suddenly occurred to her that the future as she was now creating it might end up looking exactly like the past she had just finished living. She had never seen a Kelly-green suit anywhere in St. Thomas or London, and when she returned to her little house by the Courthouse, there would be no green suits hanging in her closet, either.

Charlie suddenly saw, with absolute clarity and terror, that the future she would face if she stayed where she was in life would hold no variation or distinction, it would be neither hopeful nor beautiful, shining nor strange. Once upon a time she had been young and vibrant, energetic and optimistic. She had seen possibilities where none existed and she had been absolutely determined to grab hold of the world around her and

bend it to her will. Once upon a time, she had planned a life that would be full of dinners out and trips abroad, promotions at work and children's toys left scattered around the family room floor. If she had known about them at the time, she probably would have wanted to fill her future with green suits, as well.

What had happened to that girl? Charlie ran a finger along the textured weave of cloth on a rack and frowned. Perhaps it was love's fault, she thought. Her exuberant love for Jake had led her to cast aside her dreams of moving to this awful and wonderful city and devote herself to his every need – and those of his children. Her devoted love for her parents had led her to cast aside her dreams for a brilliant future yet again and accompany them on a passage to another life, one that didn't include her. Yet. Trooper would one day pass out of her life as well. What was left for her to love anymore? Charlie suddenly felt depleted.

She gave the skinny salesgirl a frozen smile and walked dejectedly out of the store. Across the shopping corridor a trendy coffee shop beckoned and she went in and ordered the least intimidating coffee on the menu. Charlie sat down, her little wheeled weekend suitcase at her side, her frayed leather purse perched safely on her lap. As she waited for her coffee to cool she watched the parade of people bustling past, deep in lives that seemed important and vast.

She thought that most of them were probably ignorant about Death, and how it rattles in to claim us by inches and surprise. Charlie was an expert on Death. There was no point fighting against its arrival, no point pretending it wasn't there waiting to invite us beyond the veiled mirage of activity we frenetically label Life. Whether it was throwing sticks to a beloved dog on a beach or tottering through underground corridors on towering heels, we are all ignoring our end in one way or another, she thought.

Was that why Charlie didn't want to move to Toronto? Because all that was left for her to do in this world was to wait for her turn to die?

Or was it possible that there might be a lot Charlie didn't know about Life? Was it possible that she was the ignorant one? A little slice of window far above Charlie's head opened onto the street level outside and she caught a glimpse of a man walking by leading a beautiful golden retriever on a sparkling metal leash. The dog looked happy. There seemed to be a lot of good sniffing to be done out on that street.

Charlie sat at the little round table she had claimed, with her cooling coffee and her fear of living, and wrestled with the confusing emotions that flooded over her. Something had changed now. Something strange and uncomfortable had floated into her heart and she wasn't sure what to do with it. What now?

Long after her coffee had been reduced to a cold wet rim around the bottom of a paper cup, Charlie stood up and walked thoughtfully out of the coffee shop. She threaded her way through the torrent of people bubbling through the corridor and landed in front of the suit store yet again.

She looked at the gray suits with their colourful blouses and she glanced at the red outfit with its daring black top.

After a few more moments, she walked into the store and over to the rack of Kelly-green suits, and she smiled slightly at the skinny salesgirl who was hovering hopefully near the jewelry counter.

"Going to try something?" Skinny asked.

Charlie nodded, understanding finally dawning on her.

"I think it's time to try just about everything," Charlie said slowly.

Skinny nodded knowingly.

"It doesn't hurt to try," she said.

Charlie nodded her head.

"Maybe not," she said.