

# **How to Deal With Charon**

Brian Smith

## How to Deal With Charon<sup>1</sup>

At first, you don't even try. Trying would mean acknowledging him. Instead, you focus on her and what her doctor is saying. There's whining in your ears. It could be your tinnitus or it could be your body protecting you from what's being said. Either way, it's so loud that you know it can't be a nightmare because you don't wake up. Something's closing in and you're frozen in darkness, paralyzed, helpless. The doctor says, "It's cancer."

That's when the water announces Charon's arrival. Frigid, brackish, it gushes into the room. Your socks are soaked, but nobody wants to talk about it. The oncologist is probably used to the feeling, but it is new to you. The smell of rotting seaweed. A figurehead crosses the threshold: a tentacle holding a lantern. Everyone's been dancing around it, but the doctor finally broaches the subject. They explain the five-year survival rate and the ferryman glides in.

As you walk out of the clinic, she asks you to slow down. "Stop pulling my arm. What's the rush?" She hears a siren a few blocks down the road and nods, smiling as if letting you in on a joke. "They've found me, haven't they? Well, if this is the end, I won't go down without a fight." You smile and laugh, ushering her onward as you glance over your shoulder.

How do you deal with Charon? When you see him, you give him the finger.

You're past ignoring him because he shows up too often. When your cousin dies of a heart attack, the ferryman delivers the funeral invitation. You watch him check the pulse of the homeless man outside Safeway. He mans the desk at the infusion center and nods at her as she walks past. She nods back and you wonder how she can be courteous to that asshole. When you see him, you swear. When she sees him, she sighs and waves. You don't understand their relationship, but you're not supposed to. She says they have a "mutual understanding," whatever

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<sup>1</sup> In Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman whose duty it was to help people cross over the River Styx and enter the afterlife.

that means. You'd rather stay positive and hope so hard that you manifest a world where he doesn't exist.

As the number of treatment cycles grows, you complain about the process and the waiting and the uncertainty and Charon. She glares at you and says, "Wow, I'm sorry, this must be so hard for you," and that shuts you up.

And then the bastard Freddy Krugers you, showing up in your nightmares. But at least here you can shout and scream and slash at him without making her cry.

How do you deal with Charon? Maybe it starts with looking in his eyes.

Meet his stare, even though it floods your veins with ice water and acid. You want to look away and pretend he does not exist, and she knows this. "I get that you don't want to talk about it," she says, "but we have to be prepared for the worst. I don't want to be the villain here," she says, "but do you really want to be the dick that argues with a cancer patient?"

So she sits you down and as she talks, it happens again - the water, your socks, his boat, him. You say that this is a private discussion, that you didn't agree to this threesome, but she says it's what she wants. On the same pad that she used to list groceries, she now lists her treatment options. She gets partway through before her hands are shaking too much. She turns to Charon and screams, "Why is this happening to me?" He doesn't reply. In between sobs, she asks, "What will give me more time?" He stays silent. You pick up the pen and continue her list.

You both sleep badly. At some point she whispers, "Is this my fault?" and you both lie there, feeling the heft of the question press you into the mattress. And then you hear him move. You didn't know he was even there so you lunge at him but fall through him. You land on the floor and spin, ready for another try, but you freeze. He is sitting on the bed and they are looking at each other. He takes her hand and shakes his head.

You don't like it, but you let him stay. She says it's better than pretending he's not there.

Now when you get home from work sometimes you see the two of them sitting at the kitchen table. They're not friends, but she doesn't flinch when she looks at him anymore.

On your anniversary, she decides you're not going to bring him. Tickets to Hawaii aren't cheap. You ask her doctors to help, and they say they can make it happen. She takes potent meds to suffocate her nausea, her vomiting, her pain - the canaries that warn you he's coming. She asks you to find a less violent metaphor. You tell her you will but forget.

For a while, the afterglow of the islands keeps you warm and Charon is only a memory.

He returns when her oncologists keep talking about treatments but stop talking about cures.

And then you get a call from the police that there's been an accident. You almost ask if Charon met her there but before you do they tell you where she is, which hospital, and you're out the door and driving 30 over because you're racing him and his fucking ferry and you wish your eyes had wipers too and you sprint in without locking your car and you find her room and she's there and he's not.

And then you can breathe.

She explains what the doctors told her, that she'd probably crashed because of a seizure. She says they already did a brain scan and it had shown that it's spread there, too, invading that sacred temple. She uses a quiet, calm voice. You can tell she's trying to protect you. In your head, you see an hourglass and you frantically try to block the fall of the sand but it keeps slipping between your fingers.

Before the surgery, she kisses your hand. Some of her lipstick stays. You don't wash that hand until she's discharged home.

More and more, she pushes to talk about crossing the river. She starts saying “when” instead of “if.” You still don’t want to, but she’s not going down without a fight, and it’s not your call to make. She says it’s not what is on the other side that she fears, but the crossing. “I wonder if Dylan Thomas changed his tune,” she muses, “when he was dying. Raging against the dying of the light sounds like a lot of work. And pain. Do not go gentle into that good night?” she says, “Do not tempt me with a good time, Dylan.”

They’re together all the time now, and she looks more comfortable with him. So you are not surprised when she says, “I don’t want to fight it anymore.” The palliative care referral is already placed. She makes her appointment.

Off of treatment, she smiles more. She sits a little straighter, as if a weight’s been taken off. You look closer and realize Charon is helping her float, the water around him rising and cradling her. Something inside of you melts. You look at Charon. For the first time, you hate him *and* you don’t.

She hands you a letter. “Don’t read this until after,” she says. “We wrote it together when I realized he would be the inevitable co-author of my life’s last chapter. I waited to give it to you until I was sure you saw that, too.”

And then, when it’s time, this is how you deal with Charon:

You squeeze her hand and whisper, “I love you,” kissing her forehead one more time.

You beckon him closer and say, to both of them, “I’ll see you again someday.”

You place her hand gently in his.

You look him in the eyes and say, “Take care of her.”

He looks her in the eyes and nods.

He says, “I will.”