



OUR LAST SIX MONTHS



AN ILLUSTRATED MEMOIR ABOUT DEATH,
CANCER, END-OF-LIFE CARE,
LOVE, FAMILY, AND
FORGIVENESS

by
Emily Bracale



Preface and Thanks

For the past eight months, since my son's dad died of cancer, I've been working on this book. My utter delight and involvement in the process has made for some eyebrow-raising moments as people have offered their condolences. I have thanked them—and in the next breath informed them that I've been working on a sort of *comic* book about it! Let me explain where I'm coming from, and I think you'll see why this makes sense.

During the months before Aubrey's death, when I was helping him, my mind became too burdened and my attention span became too short to digest nonfiction books or lengthy novels, but when there was time to relax, then graphic novels and graphic memoirs kept my attention positively riveted. Some were about lovely things such as weddings and travel, but most were about serious things such as illness, cancer, death, and end-of-life care. Pictures made these subjects more approachable, and reading about other people's real-life challenges gave me more courage and perspective to deal with our situation. One day, I thought, I might create such a book about us: an ordinary family going through extraordinary circumstances. This idea didn't come out of the blue.

Since elementary school I've been journaling, painting, and making simple line drawings about daily life, so I was already taking notes and drawing a few cranky little comics in the midst of helping Aubrey—partly as a coping device. ("Gallows Humor" and "The Pants" are examples.) The inspiration and intention to actually get on with creating this book arrived during my drive to the crematorium. Suddenly I envisioned what it could be: a book I would have wanted to read even while down in the depths. I wanted so much to read it that I had to get on with making it! This project also assisted with the grieving process. It was both the method of digestion and the imperative to digest; I had to revisit what I'd been through and witnessed, then decide what to depict and describe. It turned out to have more text than a typical graphic memoir, several artistic styles instead of one, and lots of little themes within each chapter. While it is a real-life story, I did employ some poetic and artistic license to make the pieces hang together as a whole, and I altered some appearances, places, and names.

My hope is that this book will offer information, insights, comfort, and even laughter to other people, and help them become more prepared (or at least know they are not alone) should they ever have to face similar circumstances. I hope it sparks conversations about end-of-life choices, health care, and the medical insurance industry in this country. Beyond its focus on dying, this story is meant to be a celebration of Aubrey's life, and I hope that it offers some closure for his many loving fans who never had a chance to say good-bye.

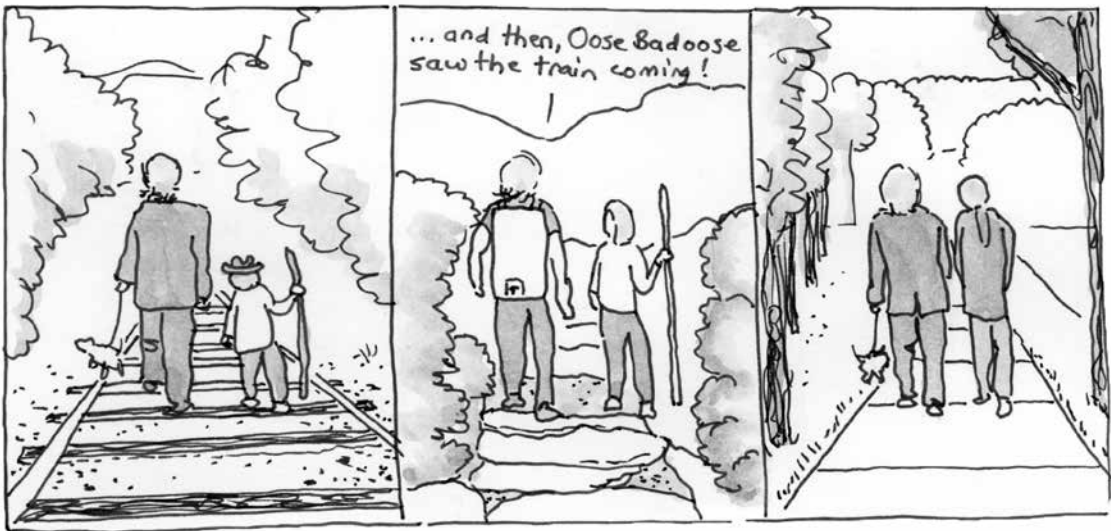
Thanks to everyone who sent love and prayers and made donations to Aubrey's fundraiser; it would take a page of fine print to list everyone who helped us. Hospice's support was one of the brightest lights in the darkness, and I hope this story conveys my gratitude and encourages other families to seek what Hospice offers (that is, when the time comes). Thanks to my supreme editor Arthur Westing for such meticulous service. (Any remaining errors are my own.) Thanks to Steve Bohrer for all the loving encouragement through this difficult year, for always being supportive about this project, and for assisting in the polishing. Many thanks to all family members and friends who are represented as characters, especially my son, who showed interest in each new illustration, offered feedback on the writing, brought up more Dad stories, and was enthusiastic and willing to have me share them with the world. I offer these efforts with love and gratitude.

Emily Bracale
December 16, 2017

Dad Walks



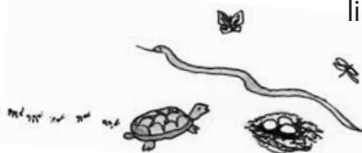
Every day, since Earl was born, his dad showed up for a walk.
Aubrey, my ex-husband, always knocked politely at my door.
Tucker, the little dog, was always happy to see him!



When Earl was quite young, his dad told him stories—incidents of mischief from his own childhood—playing with cousins in the country during summer vacations, sneaking over the fence into the baseball stadium near his house, and riding the rails by hopping freights.

Sometimes it was hard to tell what was for real and what was embellishment! His dad was a fine story teller.

They were equally comfortable walking along in silence. Earl liked to daydream, and he knew if they were quiet they'd be more likely to encounter wild things.





They went out walking in all kinds of weather. The only days that Aubrey missed were a blizzard, an ice storm, and whenever his car broke down.



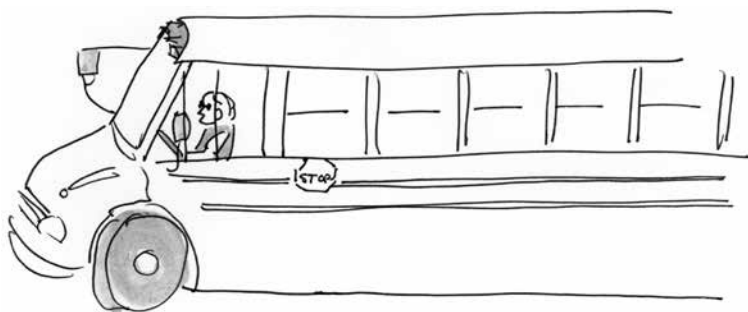
During the school year, Aubrey drove the morning bus route, went home to his apartment to write, then came to my house around lunch time. He worked at different schools, drove different routes in different years, but he always showed up for the Dad Walk.



Often he brought Earl a little treat: a freshly baked bagel with cream cheese from Agnes's bagel shop, or cookies, apples, and trail mix from the hiking camp he drove for every summer.



Every visit ended the same. Aubrey would say to his son, "I love you, you're a good boy." Then they would do their special handshake and one-armed casual hug.



After that, Aubrey went on to drive his afternoon bus route, then back to his apartment. I went back to solo parenting, being Head of Household, Self-employed, with one Dependent. It had been that way most of the time since Earl was born.

Finding Out

Monday, January 9th, Aubrey announced:



Well, a heart condition! That was news! And a decent excuse to retire. I remembered another time he had quit his bus job. We'd been married at the time. I'd supported him financially for a while, until it became untenable. At least this time he was old enough to be receiving Social Security retirement benefits.

I asked if he'd told anyone at work about his health, and he said no. I knew his aversion to official business, including filling out forms, so I offered to pick up a housing application and help him fill it out. There was a subsidized housing facility just up the street. He could walk here and Earl could walk there.



He explained that he wanted to change his diet, but his landlord was strictly vegan, because of her spiritual beliefs, and she didn't want any animal products to be served or consumed under her roof.



Tuesday, January 10th, we didn't see Aubrey because he had another appointment, and he didn't call after it to give us a report. We tried to be patient, but it was the only thing we could think about.

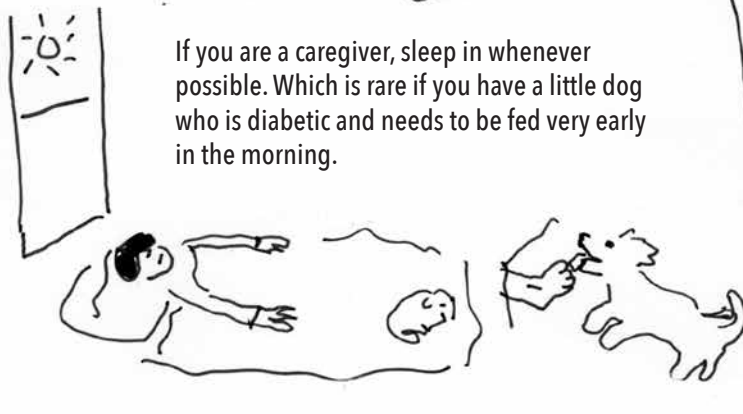


Wednesday, January 11th, Aubrey picked Earl up from Social Studies, we all ate lunch (toast and eggs), then they had Study Hall. Aubrey filled out the housing application himself. Then he prepared to leave. I confronted him when Earl was out of hearing range.



Coping Strategies

If you are a caregiver, sleep in whenever possible. Which is rare if you have a little dog who is diabetic and needs to be fed very early in the morning.



Don't forget to give him his shot before you go back to sleep.



Let him out to pee right away whenever he asks or he'll pee on the floor.

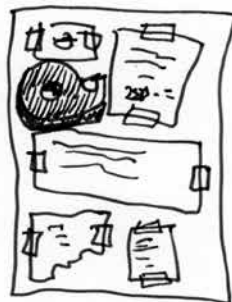
Don't act startled by the phone ringing.



It may be a doctor or nurse or relative or long lost friend of the beloved, full of stories.



You'll get used to these surprises, and all other calls will seem boring.

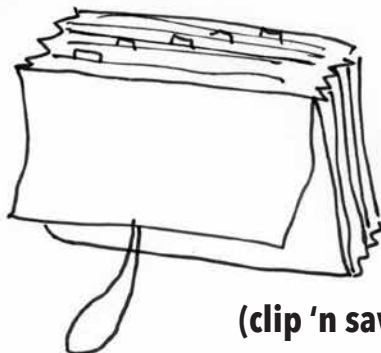


Take copious notes, even if they are sloppy looking.

Save all notes and business cards, tape them down to larger paper.



Store it all in one of those cool accordion files.



Use the living room floor to organize unpaid bills, line them up by type, discard duplicates, make it a game.

(clip 'n save)

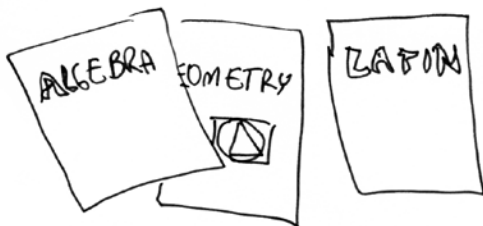


Let key people in on the story: your kid's teachers, principal, private lesson instructors, and coaches. Anyone who is cool will want to "have your back."

"Let us know if there is anything we can do for you."

"Of course he can turn it in late. Family comes first!"

"We are so sorry, please keep us in the loop so we can support him."



Don't sweat it if your child gets behind in every subject, but still encourage his or her accomplishments. It is impossible and absurd to be dogmatic in the face of the impending death of a parent.

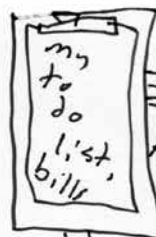
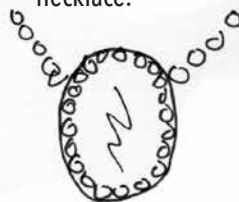
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Wear your favorite clothes that are the most comfortable. Dress nicely enough that if you suddenly get a phone call and have to go to the ER or ICU or meet with doctors you will look as if you mean business.



Get a haircut so it is fast to brush.

Wear a favorite necklace.



Use all the clipboards you own, buy more. (I used seven at one point.)

Have lots of baths. Add sea salt, or Epsom salts, or bubble bath, or a few drops of lavender oil.



Add more pillows

Go to bed early. Watch movies and read graphic novels. Eat dinner in bed, drink red wine.



When independent single-dad Aubrey reveals that he has stage 4 cancer, “normal life” goes out the window for his ex-wife and their thirteen year old son. They and others witness his brave efforts to heal himself in his final months of life as he struggles to come to terms with his mortality. The family learns on their feet as they encounter each new situation. The narrative describes the patient’s experiences with hospitals and nursing care, the end-of-life decisions he encounters, the activities of his caregivers, the responsibilities of his health-care advocates, and the role of professional helpers such as Social Workers and Hospice. This real-life story showcases what many people in the USA go through when dealing with the governmental and health insurance bureaucracies, end-of-life choices and healthcare, and the profound effects of poverty on health. In the face of all these challenges, it is the generosity of Aubrey’s family, friends, and community that makes all the difference.

This unusual hybrid book conveys half of its story visually, through hundreds of cartoons, comics, and painted illustrations integrated with the text. There is a tremendous depth of tenderness in the telling, even a dose of humor. Ultimately, this book is a heart-warming celebration of life and love.



“I enjoyed *Our Last Six Months* so much. It is heartfelt and thoughtful and a damn good read. What a great way to remember Aubrey, and to help others who find themselves in the land of the sick. Bravo!”—**Lynne Assaf, Hospital Clinical Social Worker**

“This is more than a memoir—it is an essential guidebook for others in similar difficult situations. The author gives us a direct and true account in an honest and openhearted way, never maudlin or sentimental. Illustrations help to tell this story with warmth and humor. This is a gem of a book.”—**Jeanie Smith, Board President, The Whole Heath Center**



Author photo © Hana Bracale

Emily Bracale is a lifelong artist and educator. She is a graduate of the Interlochen Arts Academy and College of the Atlantic. Her professional experience includes classroom teaching at public and private schools, art education for children and adults, graphic design, landscape design, watercolor landscape painting, and nonfiction writing. She is the author and illustrator of *In the Lyme-Light: Portraits of Illness and Healing* (2010) and the revised edition, *In the Lyme-Light II: Portraits of Illness and Healing* (2014).

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