

Sounds Like This

The first headache, the first real bad one, was sometime in March, I don't remember the date. I know I was hanging a cabinet in some blonde's kitchen when it dropped me to my knees. She wasn't there, was at her job at the software complex in town so I went into her medicine cabinet and swallowed four Advil as well as one of everything on the second shelf.

I felt pretty good after twenty minutes, too good to go back to work actually.



The second headache was about a week later. I was watching some porn with Julia, my wife, and drinking white wine. I don't usually drink wine but it was left over from a party. Then all of a sudden it felt like someone was spraying a fire hose in the space between my brain and my skull.

I tried to shake it off because we were going to have sex, but it wouldn't go. I tend to view doctors as over-paid pill pushers who can't see people – just symptoms – and see symptoms per their potential dollar value and I avoid them at all costs, but Julia took one look at my face and said we were going to the hospital.

The doc in the emergency room was pretty cool actually, if much too chipper for eleven p.m. on a Friday. He was about fifty, trim, with an eighteen-hole tan. When he talked to us I felt like he was overly focused on my wife. But she looked good and had that scent of near-sex on her.

He did a CAT scan and there was the tumor, looking a little like a large peanut, somewhere between my left eye and ear.

"Is that what I think it is?" I said.

"I'm afraid so," he said.

"It looks exactly like a peanut."

"We've got to keep you here for some more tests."

"What tests?"

"Whether it's benign or not. Or maybe it's an aneurysm, or just something that will take care of itself on its own."

"That's a long shot, isn't it? This is it, isn't it?"

"Hey." The doctor held up his hands. "Whoa. Whoa. I can't say. Way too early."

I turned to my wife. She was crying in a sweet silent way. I wanted to brush her tears away with the soft part of my thumb but I was lying on the gurney and thought I might poke her in the eye.

"Julia. Hey, Julia," I said, like the song.

"Did you ever get the health insurance like I asked?"

"The paperwork's in the mail."

"You're lying."

"Yeah, I am," I admitted. "I love you."

"We're going to lose the house," she said.



I stayed in the hospital for three days, and it came to a little over thirty thousand dollars. And at the end of all that time and money, all they could say was: yes it was cancer and they couldn't take it out without turning me into a vegetable, most likely a blind and spastic one. I had four to six months to live. I remember feeling that they should be able to figure that out in a way that didn't cost so much or that at least, considering the diagnosis, I deserved a discount.



Julia cries a lot, which takes the pressure off me. The ride home from the hospital was no exception. I felt reasonably alright about the situation because they had given me some Demerol pills. Demerol makes any ex-

perience seem like the best experience ever. Every turn we made on the drive felt as good as sex outside in a thunderstorm. I don't think I could have made it as a doctor because I would be too tempted by all the drugs.

"What are we going to do now?" Julia said, when we pulled into the driveway.

"We'll make the most of it."

"How?"

"We could take that trip we've been talking about. To the D.R."

"How?"

"We'll put it all on my credit card. I bet I won't have to pay it off if I'm dead."

She nodded and her cheeks shone and, seeing that from this angle I could wipe her tears without mishap, I wiped her tears.

"Are you going to call your parents?" she asked.

"No."

"I think you should."

"No." I hadn't spoken to my parents in three years. I wanted nothing to do with them. They drank too much and fought like big stupid idiots and had spent my childhood explaining to me the important role I played in their unhappiness. I had only just begun to understand that I had nothing to do with it. And then this.



In the Dominican Republic it was hot as balls and there were a lot less Americans and more Europeans than I anticipated. There are two different classes of vacationers: those who think a vacation is something you do, and must be done with as much intensity as possible, and those who think doing gets in the way of vacationing. I fall in the second group, Julia in the first. Nevertheless, I let her convince me to hike into the mountains and visit a coffee plantation. The land and ocean were beautiful, all lush green and deep blue, like the end zone at Giants Stadium, the new one. During happy hour at the resort, I looked at palm trees and tried to feel more appreciative for the glorious bounty that is this world.

Palm trees. Palm trees. Glorious palm trees, I thought to myself. It felt a little forced.

"What are you thinking?" Julia asked.

"I'm looking at the palm trees."

She patted my hand.

I thought she might say wise things, or maybe the other tourists would say wise things or even the coffee growers would or at least someone would say things that my brain would transform into a soft wisdom, because now it was dying, getting smushed flat by a peanut. But everyone said the same things pretty much. They asked each other what they did back where they came from or they talked about that one time they passed through the other's city and liked it very much. Great museums there. Then they got drunk and angled to get each other into bed or went looking in the streets for prostitutes.

"Let's go home," I said to Julia.

"Don't you want to be with me?"

"I want to be with you at home."

At home it was better. It is a medium-sized town Julia and I live in and people whose names I could not remember but whose faces I knew pretty well would come up to me in the store and help me bag my groceries. I could have bagged them just fine. Older women would grab my wrists and, nodding slowly, stare into my eyes. I enjoyed the perverse silences when I sat around with my friends Doug and Debois watching the Mets blow another one. They didn't know what to say about my peanut but were too worn out from their own lives – hard work, loud wives, and young kids – to let that inability interfere with their evening.

Doug actually started bringing over peanuts every time he visited. Salted, unsalted, covered in chocolate, yogurt, or exotic substances made from beets and Amazonian sweeteners in the backroom of the health food store – a different type each time. I think he was trying to open a conversation though he might just have been hungry.

"Cut it out," I said.

"They're therapeutic."

“You don’t even know what that word means.”

“They’re organic.”

“Organic? You eat six Slim Jims a day.”



I got to wondering if I could feel the tumor grow and laying in bed in the mornings was certain I’d gotten the knack of it but the doctor explained that couldn’t be possible because the brain doesn’t have any pain nerves. But I disagreed. I thought the entire brain was basically a pain nerve, and all of life and thought was a struggle to minimize its agony as much as possible. Why else would people do stupid shit like get bombed, bomb other people, hunt and kill happy animals in single-digit temperatures and listen to rap music at high volumes except to find a way to override their pain?

The benefit of this viewpoint is it made the idea of dying much more welcoming.

I had just turned thirty, which is pretty young to be getting ready to die, but I felt that, other than spending too much time watching sports and porn, I had lived my life pretty honestly and loved my wife pretty well.



I sold Doug the pickup, and made plans to give Pecker, my horny Shepherd-Lab mutt, to Debois, who had a bigger yard and (though I didn’t say it) nicer kids. Julia agreed with this arrangement – her and Pecker’s relationship had never fully recovered from her decision to buy a white couch. The headaches were getting worse. They usually only improved if I piled six pillows on my head and wept softly. During the daytime, I lay in the grass beneath the willow out front with Pecker and we watched cars pass. People seemed in such a rush to get places and very lost in their thoughts. One man pulled over to ask me what kind of dog Pecker was. “Unbright,” I said. He rolled up his window and drove off.

The clouds looked very friendly and sympathetic. I decided that puffy white clouds are one of the more underrated miracles of nature. Big loud waterfalls are overrated. They’re too violent to really settle into.

A beautiful woman is always on the top of the list, which is why I am grateful to be married to Julia. Not always, but quite often, I will look at her and my breath will catch.

Pecker lay next to me licking his nuts and scratching as much as always but he could tell something was up.



Then the strangest thing happened. I felt better. I lay under the tree with Pecker and started feeling antsy. At first I thought I was just bored or maybe getting dizzy, but then no, really, I wanted to get up and walk around. So I did, back and forth across the lawn. I threw tennis balls for Pecker and lay down and wrestled with him. The energy was quite surprising. It went away but two days later it came back. I went to see the doctor, and he took some more CAT scans and came back with a strange look on his face and said, “Well, this is a little interesting.” The peanut had stabilized. It was the size of a golf ball and holding. It wasn’t gone, but it hadn’t grown as fast as they’d anticipated and I might have a couple months more than previously thought. I might have a couple years conceivably. Or, conversely, he admitted, just a few days. He had no idea when you really got down to it, but couldn’t bring himself to put it that way.

Doctors do not know so much as they would like. In the end, they fail every single patient.

“This is quite a blessing,” he said. “You may have some time yet.”

“But I’m still going to die?”

“Yes.”

“I mean soon.”

“I know what you mean. You could take a trip.”

“We did that.”

We were silent. I looked at the peanut on the viewer, dark surrounded by my lit-up mind.

“Still. Amazing,” I said. “What do you think, Julia?”

She shrugged her shoulders. She seemed down.

“We could go miniature golfing later,” I said.

“Call me if you have any questions, Julia,” said the tan doctor.

In the car driving home, I was very tired and the world was tilting sideways. Each pothole made me belch. It seemed a great percentage of clouds in the sky were peanut shaped.

“We could plant a garden,” I said. “We could build that new mudroom with Debois’ help. We could camp out at the blues festival.”

“Do you really feel better?”

“Yes. I think so. Drive slower over the bumps.”

Julia kept looking at me and shaking her head.



The next day, she came home from her job at Big Lots and said Dan’s wife Lenore had heard of a really wise man living up in the hills southwest of town and we should see him. I asked her what was so wise about him. She said she didn’t know, graduate school maybe, or maybe he’d written a book, but what did we have to lose. He turned out to look pretty normal, kind of short and bald. He had a big presence though and a kind, relaxed energy. He looked me straight in the eye and talked about death like he was talking about the weather. Didn’t see dying as a big deal at all, just something you made some preparations for and eased through to the next destination, sort of like closing the car windows before driving through a rainstorm. This was a new viewpoint, but I could see myself coming around to it. I confessed to him though that my generally low self-esteem looked at death as an easy way out of an additional forty or fifty years or so of finding myself lacking.

“It’s hard to have a peacefully accepted death without a fully accepted life,” he said.

“I accept my life,” I said. “I just find the protagonist aggravating.”

“Will you give yourself a hard time about dying?”

“Most likely,” I admitted.



In the car on the way back, we passed a three-legged deer limping by the side of the road. It looked up and into my eyes for two seconds straight. I broke down and cried. Julia pulled over and held me. I couldn’t have said what I was crying for. I had never felt that interested in my life

before I was sick, so why should it be such a big deal now? The only thing that is true in life is that it ends, so if you come to that point and feel unprepared, do you have anyone to blame but yourself? Still, I wept and wept. I saw the three-legged deer foraging in the coming winter snows and wept. I remembered the palm trees in the Dominican and wept. Julia lifted up her shirt so I could rest my face on her soft skin. I reached up and held her boob.

“I’m sorry to leave you, darling,” I said.

“I’m sorry too.”

“You’ll be alright, won’t you? Promise me.”

“I’ll miss you,” she said. But she would be alright.

“And stay away from the doctor. He’s been checking you out pretty hard.”

“Okay.”

“Promise.”

“Honey, I promise.”



I stayed up that night after Julia had gone to sleep and watched her, touched her long black hair and rued the 10,000 small and mean things I had done to her. I once mocked her nationality, culture, and gender for backing the car into the front porch. I made her cry from lack of physical affection when feeling grumpy over our debts. It took three months of her asking before I fixed the closet door.



I decided I would concentrate on fully accepting my life. I solicited suggestions on how to do it. Doug offered to sell me back my pickup for what he’d paid for it. But then I recalled how hard it was to stay grateful when I was mortaring bricks at eight a.m. on a cold morning and my intestines were stopped up like glue and declined. Julia thought I should sit through a class or two on comparative religion or mythology or even Shakespeare at the community college. I tried that but it didn’t work either. But that wasn’t a surprise – I’ve rarely, in my life, felt grateful while sitting in big airless rooms with linoleum floors. One day, I bought lots

of scented candles and set them around the bedroom for when Julia and I made love. That put us both in a good mood. Late one night my pride finally broke down and I called my parents, told them where I was at, and thanked them for introducing me to this world.

“Sorry,” they said.

“That’s okay,” I said. “I have a good doctor. I’ve had a good run.”

“No, I meant, sorry for not being a better parent.”

“That’s okay,” I said, and I saw that I meant it. They’d done the best they knew. It felt like letting down an armful of groceries.



People seemed to want to talk to me, so I decided to do that for a while, sit under the willow and talk to people. They’d come over and we’d drink iced tea and they’d clear their throat to start talking about how God had brought them out of darkness or out of a terrible habit like morning drinking or midnight eating. God, son, he grabbed the cigarette right out of my mouth. I would tell them about the clouds and palm trees and driving a car through a car wash and how this particular willow sighed if the wind blew from the southeast, all these things I was noticing. Some left upset over this. Some clasped their hands over their hearts and blinked back tears. More people stopped by, women mostly, with stage-four cancers in their breasts and ovaries and other, less gender-specific, places. Some seemed to think I might give them the key to beating their disease – they left pretty quickly. But most of them didn’t want to be saved. They were beaten by the fighting, beaten by the medicines that were supposed to win the war. They had gotten tired of puke buckets and Ensure shakes and that tightrope feeling as they waited in doctors’ offices while the doctor opened their file and hummed. They were tired of hope. I agreed with them. We do indeed turn the natural process of things into an enemy, I said.

I felt like I was just repeating back to them what they were saying to me, but they were very thankful. We form a strange clique, we dying; we terrify people or we invoke their pity. There is no middle ground.

Meanwhile: this tree. The wind is blowing from the southeast – hear that?

Guruji, Dan took to calling me, after watching the Gandhi movie on cable. He bowed deeply whenever passing me.

“Ha, ha, you’re a dick.” I said.

“That’s not very holy,” he pointed out.



Summer’s ending. The Mets are fourteen games out of first and have emptied the bench. My legs are like pipe cleaners and I am quite pale. Often my brain feels like it is being squeezed by a warm giant’s hand. Sometimes I feel limitless, and then when I catch sight of my body in the mirror or in the windows at night, it doesn’t seem possible that all my life I assumed that it was me. Such a small, pitiable thing.

In the evenings, Julia and I lay in the dark on the white couch that Pecker desecrated and sip chicken broth together. With the TV and radio off and the windows open, the crickets are thunderously loud. We don’t talk much, but it feels good to show her that I understand what she has done for me. I am usually not scared.

A nurse comes from time to time. I got a good two and a half months over what the tan doctor predicted and I’ve decided not to bother with the hospital this time. Pecker and I sit under the tree and watch cars. He is good about not chasing them. Chasing cars has to be the most aggravating trait of all the dogs I owned before Pecker. I have not yet figured out the purpose of my life. But I think about that a lot less and try to remember, at least once a day, the beauty of clouds. Rainbows are easy to stop and admire, but have you ever been stopped cold by the sound of a car crunching slowly away on a gravelly driveway? Beautiful, I tell you. There are many such jewels waiting for your attention. Ripples on a pond. The moment when your wife’s breath catches before a sneeze. Cranking down a car window. Rain falling on leaves. The sounds of kids on a playground. I have come to believe that just one of these moments contains everything you need for a lasting type of happiness, the kind that takes into account death and sadness. I am glad I have not made too much a success of my life or then it might be harder to give up. As it is, I can very easily put aside my thoughts to admire the cries of the loons in the pines. They sound like this: