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SIX TO TWELVE

I USED TO CHANGE TRUCK TIRES. Mack trucks, eighteen-wheelers, sometimes bigger. That was my job. I'd be at the station or else on call, usually at night, and some guy's rig would get a flat and I'd go out with the company truck and set him up with a spiffy new tire. Now I can't even drive a car. Kim says I should be happy — driving's a pain in the ass. I say that's like telling a guy who got his foot blown off to be happy, because walking's such a pain in the ass. Not long ago, this would have been followed by Kim changing the subject or else turning the radio back up. These days she just raises an eyebrow and says, "Look who can't take a joke *now*."

They let me work as the dispatcher for awhile. Larry wasn't thrilled to get bumped off that gravy job and go back on the road, but he probably figured it wouldn't be for long. Six to twelve months at the most. Nobody forced him off dispatch — he had seniority — but he'd be damned if he'd let a dying man (that would be me) get forced out of a job because he refused to be inconvenienced for awhile. Larry's funny that way. He'll stand awkwardly holding the door for a guy in a wheelchair when he'd let it slam in anybody else's face, or he'll squint in agony and listen to a phlegm-voiced geezer with a hole in his throat, where he'd tell anybody else to shut the hell up after *How's it goin', Larry?* It's not kindness; it's embarrassment. The day I came back to work with my doctor's note and five-tissue tearjerker story was the last day Larry ever called me "Stove Top" — as in "stuffing," as in "between the ears." Somehow I kind of miss that, but I think he got too self-conscious about drawing undue attention to what turned out to *actually* be between my ears. Ernie, one of the other tire changers, a pipsqueak without ill will for any person on earth — he ambled over not long after that day and asked, "Well, how long do you think before it's over and you can go back to your regular job?" Larry grabbed him by the back of the neck and grunted, "When it's over for Pete, it's *over*, Ernie. Don't you get that?"

Well, I sure got it. I got it like a grenade exploding inside my head. That's what

the first real headache felt like. One second I was making an ice cream sundae (it sometimes worked as a remedy), and then my normal-sized headache flared into shrapnel tearing through the inside of my skull and I was on the floor watching chocolate syrup ooze over the tiles until the second wave hit and I vomited and passed out. Woke up two hours later to the smell of fresh bread. To most people that would mean food, but to me it meant Kim was home from the bakery, so I opened my eyes and there she was. Shaking me and looking so urgent and scared that my first thought was, Where's the rapist, I'll kill him. Then the sound came back on. I could hear Kim shouting my name and telling me to wake up, and my head was suddenly on fire again. White heat. The first words I could say were: "Jesus Christ, Kim, not so loud! My head's killing me!" Kim, by some miracle of will, got me to my feet and helped me towards the door, and I noticed our cat sitting, licking its paws at the end of a meandering chocolate syrup trail. I figured Kim would freak out over that, but she didn't seem to notice. "Come on, Pete," she was saying, on the edge of panic. "Just as far as the car. Come on, honey. Come on."

Three days of medical tests followed. They took my blood, they injected stuff into my blood, they put me on a slow ride through the hole of a giant powdered donut, they used the words "your brain" and "your skull" and "really long needle" in the same sentence and then put me to sleep for a couple of hours. They asked me questions: Problems with memory? Tired lately? Nausea? Your father? Your mother? Problems with vision? Problems with hearing? Medications? Alcohol? Yes, *please*. And during all this, I kept thinking of Klutzo, our cat. The crazy cat couldn't jump onto a windowsill without bashing its head against the pane and ending up splayed on the floor. How was it supposed to get through three days on its own? And what about the chocolate? "Won't Klutzo get kind of sick if she licks all that chocolate up off the floor?" I asked Kim first chance I got.

"Klutzo's being taken care of," she assured me.

"Yeah, but the chocolate mess," I said. "I left a little splotch of orange juice on the floor that one time, remember? And we had a swarm of ants the next day. Ants everywhere."

"It's been taken care of," Kim told me. "Don't worry about it."

"It's been taken care of how? You haven't left since we got here."

"Pete," she said sweetly, on the verge of tears, "honey — shut up."

The doctors were nice enough to let us sleep in the same room that night, but there were no double beds. Kim turned out the lights and curled into a chair at my bedside. I offered to let her have the bed — “I can sleep standing up, you know me,” I told her — but she said, “No, that’s okay.” For awhile there was just quiet and the occasional sounds of footsteps outside the door. I heard someone stop, clear his throat. I waited for the door to open, a frizz-haired, Bozo-grinning doctor to come in and say, “All this for a headache? What’s this hospital coming to? Here, take two of these and call me in the morning.” But nothing happened and when I didn’t hear any footsteps walking away from the door, this sense of dread slipped underneath the sheets and sent chills all the way to my toes. I looked toward Kim and listened to her very faint breathing, but couldn’t tell if she was asleep or staring into space, worrying. “I’m growing another brain,” I joked in a whisper. “You married the next evolutionary step, honey. Aren’t you proud?” Happy with that, I kept on, a little louder this time: “Actually, it’s earwax. It’s this huge, slimy ball of earwax, and they’re gonna have to stick a blowtorch into my ear to melt it since I never use Q-Tips.” No response from Kim, but I was on a roll. “My dad had a metal plate in his head,” I told the dark room and my maybe sleeping wife and the throat-clearer outside the door. “It got passed on to me when I was born, only it evolved into a license plate, a personalized license plate that reads *BRAIN ZIT*. Wisconsin plates.” And Kim never said a word and I joked myself out until there was nothing funny about anything anymore, and finally I blurted, “Well, are they telling you, Kim? Because nobody’s said a goddamn word to me, nobody’s said *boo!* It’s: Here, we’ll scan this, we’ll poke that, but not a word, when is someone gonna tell me what exactly is going on in my own goddamn head?”

If Kim wasn’t awake before, she woke up then. She leaned over and held me and shushed me, and I told her I was sorry, that I was just maybe a little confused, maybe a little nervous, and she said, “I know, Pete. I know.”

At the end of all this, they finally decided to let us in on the big secret. Dr. Yasserman, who had been very nice the whole time and very professional and who even looked like he really had his act together — he ushered us into his office and said, shutting the door, “Please, sit down.” So we did, in a pair of chairs across from the desk, which the doctor sat on the corner of, gripping the edges like the roof was about to come off and he’d be sucked into space. I glanced around for something to

hold onto and Kim held out her hand and I took it.

Dr. Yasserman began his spiel then, speaking in very pleasant but serious tones, his young, smooth-cheeked face a model of courteous professionalism. Now, I heard all of this through the haze of another piranha-in-my-skull headache, but mostly it was along the lines of: “Let’s see, got a cold front moving in over the eastern hemisphere of the cerebellum. Heavy precipitation is very likely. Hailstones maybe. Look for highly malignant tumor activity to really shake things up in six to twelve months.” Or something like that. Kim put a vice grip on my hand as he talked. I nodded my head, listening very intently, not actually really picking up half of what he was saying. Wondering how much more pressure it would take for the desk’s edge to break off in the doctor’s hands and whether he’d be able to keep that pleasant look on his face and continue if that happened. He got out the pictures. He said this and that and this and pointed at pictures of what was supposed to be my brain — it occurred to me to ask for copies so I could show Larry at work proof that I did, indeed, have one — and Dr. Yasserman said, “You see there?” My mom used to say that. I’d spill the milk or else I’d fall out of a tree and she’d throw up her arms in hysterics and exclaim, “You see there?”

Next thing I knew, Dr. Yasserman was standing up and straightening his tie, saying, “I am truly sorry,” and, “I’ll leave you alone for a moment.” He was gone like a miracle-pill salesman out of a bad-tempered saloon town and Kim had her glasses pinched between her fingers and she was sobbing into her hands in a way that stripped bare all uncertainty and left only one stark, raving fact. So I didn’t have to ask for clarification on any of what the doctor had just said. I knew.

Kim drove us home. She drove with her arms braced against the wheel, elbows locked, head tilted slightly forward like a bull looking for an open invitation to charge. “How do they know?” I kept asking. “I mean, how do they know these things? Maybe my MRI revealed a marquee for a big going-out-of-business sale or something. Maybe the cells down on Cell Wall Street were all shouting, *Sell! Sell!* I don’t know. Maybe —”

“Goddammit, Pete!” Kim finally snapped. She hit the steering wheel with her fist and the horn got stuck for about eight seconds and Kim flipped off a succession of drivers who shot dirty looks her way. A stoplight gave her a chance to breathe. “I need some time,” she said. “I know you’re dealing with this in your own way, and that’s

fine. I'll be fine. But I need time to deal with this on my own terms first. Okay? So could you ease off the jokes, just for right now? Please? I just need time."

I didn't say anything and the light turned green. We drove past food chains and bowling alleys and dry cleaners and pet stores. I thought of reptiles and every cliché about death and rebirth galloped gaily through my stream of consciousness. If I knew anything it was that I was no goddamn bug gonna cuddle up in its sleeping bag for awhile and flit out as a butterfly. Jesus Christ, have I always said I wanted to be cremated when the time comes? "I need some time, too," I told Kim. My voice came out a lot smaller than I'd meant for it to.

We got home and Kim kissed me once on the forehead and then locked herself in the bedroom. I sat on the floor with Klutzo purring in my lap and listened to my iPod on shuffle over the headphones. When Springsteen's "Atlantic City" came on, I kept hitting repeat over and over. I listened to every detail of the music like I was hearing it for the first time, listened to every cadence of the guy's sometimes broken voice until I found myself very suddenly in tears and decided this wasn't fun anymore. I checked the refrigerator for ice cream. We were out of chocolate syrup. Looking toward the bedroom I got the kind of unease that comes from looking at a normally-open closed door from behind which comes only silence.

I left a note: *Kim: Went to the grocery store for choc. sauce. Be back in 6 to 12 minutes. Love, Pete.* We always put "love" in our notes, no exception. Five years of marriage and it's something we do to this day. My aunt told me don't ever assume these things or take them for granted and so I don't. These are the little rules you follow in life. Like not stepping on cracks, like tossing salt over your shoulder, like not standing outside in lightning storms and blaspheming the name of God. If you make a face like that it will freeze and you'll go through the rest of your life a freak. "The rules are there to help you," my mom always told me. *Love, Kim. Love, Pete. I love you. I love you, too. I'm sorry. Forgive me. Please. Thank you. Excuse me. Bless you.*

I listened to every detail of the music like I was hearing it for the first time, listened to every cadence of the guy's sometimes broken voice until I found myself very suddenly in tears and decided this wasn't fun anymore.

I closed the door as quietly as I could on my way out so Kim wouldn't think I'd hit my head on the floor again.

Because of the fact that a headache or seizure could at any time scream *SURPRISE!* and completely incapacitate me, maybe even cause me to black out again, and because of the prescription medication I was now using to try to alleviate this, I couldn't drive, and I certainly couldn't go out in the middle of the night to change semi-truck tires. Howard, my boss, took me into his office the night I got back to work and shut off the country-spewing radio for the first time I'd ever witnessed and sat me down as he himself sat down and slapped his huge palms against his thighs. "How's your wife?" he asked. Usually the question was "How's *the* wife?" and it was asked as small talk. But Howard had read my doctor's note and heard my sad story.

"She's not real happy, Howard," I told him.

"No, I imagine she's not," he agreed. "She gonna stay with ya?"

"Why the hell would you ask me that, Howard?"

He shrugged and turned red. "Ahh," he said, waving his hand in dismissal, but he didn't look at me. "Just came out. Happened to my cousin. He got cancer of the balls, and his wife was gone in a week."

"I guess I hadn't really thought about whether Kim would do that," I said.

"Don't worry about it," Howard said. "My cousin was a bastard."

"He was, was he?"

Howard nodded and finally looked at me. We sat there in the thickest unease ever to seep into that office. My eyes caught Howard's ash tray and I decided I'd try cigarettes sometime within the next six to twelve months, maybe cigars. Wild Turkey and Johnny Walker, too. Plain old Miller Lite had always been my drink, and I'd always meant to get around to trying whiskey, brandy, bourbon. I will have a terrific drunk if I make it to my thirtieth birthday, I decided. That would be eight months. Suddenly, increments of time had taken on the importance of every unit of monetary measurement in the world, and I could hardly even think in any other terms. Howard ran a hand over his gray crew cut and slapped his thighs again. He had, I noticed, two clocks and three calendars in his office.

"You're a good guy, Pete," Howard finally said. "I won't pussyfoot and say it'll be all right, 'cause I know it's gonna be rough. You ever need to talk to somebody, this

office is always open. I just wanted you to know that.” He slapped his thighs yet a third time, struggled up out of his seat, patted my shoulder and left his hand there for a second, then went out to ask Larry to let me have the dispatcher job.

More visits to Dr. Yasserman ensued. More tests, more observations. Talk of treatment: They could use what he called a “gamma knife” to aim radiation at specific parts of the tumor, they could implant pellets in my brain that would release measured doses of radiation each day, and chemotherapy would help make the radiotherapy more effective. There were experimental treatments they could try: They could implant “suicide genes” into the cancer cells to get them to self-destruct. Dr. Yasserman kept a straight face when he told me and Kim about this, but I’d bet money he was really thinking how cool it was that he was a doctor in an age when they had suicide genes. He explained, yet again, that the tumor had tendriled in through deep parts of my brain. They could operate — they could remove chunks — but attempts at getting in deeper could leave me in a vegetative state. Dr. Yasserman squeezed his lips together and looked at me then, like he was waiting to hear what I thought about all that.

“A vegetative state,” I said. “Hell, I’ve *been* to Iowa. I don’t wanna go back *there* again.”

I began to notice that, more and more, Dr. Yasserman was taking Kim aside and talking to her in private, telling her things that I’d need to know about my condition, since — *ahem* — “your husband seems to be enshrouding himself in denial.”

“Pete,” Kim told me on the way home one time, “Dr. Yasserman’s worried that maybe you’re not grasping, or not willing to grasp, the seriousness of your situation.”

“Really?” I said. “Is my situation serious?”

Kim took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on the road, her hands on the wheel. She glanced at me and made herself smile. She wasn’t smiling much these days. She said, “He’s just, you know — he said this might be a good time for you to get your affairs in order.”

“My affairs. Kim,” I whispered, “I’ve had an incredibly boring life. In the five years we’ve been married, I haven’t had one affair! I’m so ashamed!”

That one got a genuine smile. “You’re too much. I told him you’d be fine.”

“Well, for six to twelve months, anyway.”

Kim’s smile was gone in an instant, and she almost rear-ended a pickup truck at

fifty-five miles per hour.

I tried to override what I'd just said, erase it. "I'm convinced," I told her, speaking quickly and with assurance, "that between you and Dr. Yasserman, you'll come up with some kind of agreement, you know, maybe you can get him to say, oh, sixteen to twenty months or something, and we can sort of dicker our way back up to me having a full life again. You're good at that kind of stuff. I take you to car dealers just so I can watch their smiles freeze when you start in on them. Ten thousand, nine thousand, eight, seven, sold! A wonder to behold."

Neither of us said anything after that.

A headache came on that night that made the medication seem as effective as baby powder would be against a gaping bullet wound. Vomiting turned to retching and Kim finally helped me stumble from the bathroom to the comfy chair in the living room. I'd taken to sleeping there a lot; the headaches flared worse when I was flat in bed. Kim tried giving me ice, a wet towel, none of which worked, so she held me. "Sleep," she whispered, over and over. I stomped my feet on the floor, I growled, I punched the armrests. I am dragging this woman who I love to hell with me, I thought.

At some point I did fall asleep. I woke up hours later and through a haze of pain and nausea could see Kim in the light of the kitchen, stirring something in a pot on the stove. She had consulted the ancients, was my first thought, and now there was a book of magic open on the counter beside her and she was mixing a miracle cure. I was willing to believe in magic. It was dark where I was, lying on the floor of the living room, covered snugly with a blanket. Klutzo was crouched over by the wall, staring at me in that freaked-out way cats have: eyes wide, ears back, tail bushed-out. Any other time the cat would've been snuggled next to me. But animals can sense things like approaching death. Did I get that from a reliable source or was it just a line from some movie? "C'mere, Klutzo," I said, and the knife in my head turned sharply. I winced. "Fuck you, Klutzo," I murmured, turning over.

When I looked up again, Kim was kneeling beside me. "Can I get you anything?" she asked, whispering as if in a library of sacred texts.

"What am I doing on the floor?" I mumbled. Jesus, it hurt even to talk.

"You jumped up," Kim explained, "and you stormed around and yelled for a bit until I got you to settle down and fall asleep on the floor, and then I didn't want

to wake you to get you back in the chair.” She bit her lip. “The neighbors called the cops,” she said.

“They didn’t.”

“By the time they got here you were asleep.”

“The cops came *here*?”

Kim nodded and laughed, a soft, tired laugh. “They were all set to arrest a drunken wife-beater. They didn’t want to believe you were helpless.”

I couldn’t even laugh. I squeezed my eyes shut and when I opened them back up they turned into faucets of spurting tears. “Oh, Pete,” Kim said. She tucked her hair behind seashell-intricate ears, touched my forehead with her fingers, gazed down tenderly through her glasses and tea-colored eyes. “Pete, my love,” she whispered, her face the face of compassion and devotion. All I could do was lie there and take in the sight of her and cry. All the things I’d said to her to get her to marry me, they’d all come true and I was moved as I had never quite been before by her beauty and by the love I felt coming from her, glowing from her fingertips as she stroked my forehead. The plan was, the plan always had been, that we would move to the coast, I would save enough money and we would buy a schooner-type sailboat and there we’d be, out in the ocean, in the hands of the wind and the water, and we’d be far enough from people that Kim could put on a swimsuit without getting self-conscious, and there we’d be, on a boat away from everything, riding the waves, all that mattered there in each other’s arms and what could be better than that? What could be better than that? Kim lay down next to me and I held onto her like exactly what she was, which was the one thing I loved and needed more than anything I’d ever touched or dreamed of touching, and I didn’t let go until something in the kitchen started to sizzle and hiss and she had to get back up, murmuring, “Oh shit, the goddamn soup.”

I decided I would tell her to leave me.

Over the next few days, after the headache drifted into oblivion, I planned, tried to work out every detail, how to set it up, how I wanted to do this. It would be twilight. We’d go for a walk. We’d hold hands and listen to crickets and locusts. We’d go to our spot on the railroad bridge over the river. By then the moon would be out. I’d turn to her and take her hands and gaze meaningfully into her eyes and basically beat around the bush very elaborately until I’d finally get to the point of how I wanted her to leave me.

Instead, I ended up blurting it out while I was cooking hamburgers a few nights later. “I want you to leave me,” I said. “I don’t want you to have to go through the things you’re gonna have to go through or to see the things you’ll have to see.” Kim looked at me in that speculative way she does when she’s figuring whether or not I’ve just told a joke. Then she slapped me. Real hard. I sort of stood there with my jaw hanging open, so she slapped me again, in case I hadn’t quite understood the first one. Then she told me my hamburger was getting too done. We ate supper and then watched *Arrested Development* and rolled around laughing on the rug.

After work one morning I got Larry and Ernie to go with me to the Pine Cone for steak and eggs. Ernie flirted with the waitress and told way off-color jokes, and Larry kept glowering across the table at him. Larry was quieter than usual, and I knew it was because he was censoring every thought that entered his head before speaking, not wanting to say the wrong thing around me. That, in turn, made me a bit more uncomfortable than I cared to be, and after the waitress took our orders I went to get a paper. *LOCAL MAN WINS LOTTERY*, the headline proclaimed.

When I got back to the table I heard Larry saying to Ernie, “There’s just a certain way you should behave.” Ernie was about to answer back, but then I sat down with the paper and they both shut up.

“Bruce Springsteen’s got a new album out,” I said after a long, quiet couple of minutes. “There’s a review in here.”

“Huh,” Larry said. “Hand me the sports section.”

“Bruce,” Ernie said. “The Boss. Boss of what, I’d like to know. Got the funnies in there?”

I handed out parts of the paper and sat back suddenly with a loud gasp, and both Larry and Ernie looked at me like they expected my head to split open. “I just realized I’ve never been to a Bruce Springsteen concert,” I said.

“Jesus Christ!” Ernie sighed. “I thought you were about to plop over on us.”

“Read your goddamn funnies,” Larry told him.

“It was something I was always gonna get around to doing,” I went on. “I was always gonna go to a Bruce Springsteen concert. Since I was twelve.”

The waitress came with our food and Larry and Ernie dug in right away, but I let mine set and just sort of sat there with my head back against the seat.

“Write him a letter,” Ernie said through a mouthful of bacon. “*Dear Mr. Springsteen: I’m on my last legs and I never got to see you in concert.* Some of them rock stars’ll do that, they’ll get a letter like that and give a private show to some poor kid with leukemia or whatever. Elton John did that.”

Larry leaned on the table with his elbows and pointed his fork towards Ernie. “You can knock that shit off any time, Ernie,” he growled.

“What?” Ernie said, shrugging. There were a few minutes of him and Larry just eating and throwing each other dirty looks. Ernie finally leaned over and whispered to me, “Guy’s got the disposition of a warthog.”

I heard him but I didn’t. “This is just not what I’d had in mind,” I said. “I never wanted much and the things I wanted weren’t big things. I never wanted to be rich. I never wanted a Porsche. I wanted a boat. I wanted to move to the coast and get a boat. That’s it.”

The rest of our breakfast went without much talking. Larry and Ernie put their whole upper bodies into eating their food, and we left mine cold and untouched on the table. Driving me home, Ernie played his pickup’s radio loud, and when a Bruce Springsteen song came up he cast a nervous glance my way and then changed the station. I didn’t tell him to change it back.

“So when do you plan to tell your family?” Kim asked me another day, because this was something I still had not done. I told her she was my family. She smiled, humoring me, then asked whether maybe she should tell them. “Is that something you’d prefer that I do?” she asked.

“I’ve got time,” I told her, “I’ll do it. It’s not something I’m looking forward to, but I’ll do it. I’ve got six to twelve months.”

“No, you don’t,” Kim said softly. “You’ve got five to eleven, hon. Barely that.”

We were in the kitchen, putting away dishes. We do things together like that. Dishes. Laundry. One time I didn’t cook our pork quite well enough and we both went into the emergency room with food poisoning together. They set us up in different rooms, though.

“Well!” I said, maybe a little over-loud, my voice cracking the quiet like a dropped brick. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe we should talk funerals, too. I want ‘Cemetery Polka’ played at my funeral,” I announced enthusiastically. Kim leaned

against the fridge and started rubbing the bridge of her nose beneath her glasses like she always does when she's trying to hold on to her emotions, but the gunpowder in my keg-head had been lit and I was off like a rocket. "I'm serious," I told her. "Uncle Ezra will have to be there with his accordion so he can play 'Cemetery Polka' and all the people, I'll want all the people dancing and singing and getting drunk. My cousins Joe and Bobby, they can toast their mugs together and slosh their Heinekens and say, 'Hey, here's to you, Pete, ya sonofabitch!' This will top our wedding reception," I told my wife. "Hell, maybe even *I'll* get up and dance this time. Wouldn't that be something?" I ran into the bedroom and threw open the closet. "What ever shall I wear?" I called. "I'll want a solid oak casket, I'll want —"

Kim stopped my tirade by saying, "You don't get a casket if you get cremated."

There was about a three-second beat. "Of course," I shot back. "And that's the cheap way to go, too." I marched back into the kitchen, ready to leap back into my flight of fancy, people in somber dark suits dancing to an old geezer's accordion, and there Kim stood, her face streaked with tears, and defiance and hurt and anger glinting from behind her glasses.

"Is this how it's going to be?" she asked.

"I was joking, Kim. I was just —"

"No. Shut up. I want to know if this is how it's going to be. I just want to know."

"You just wanna know," I repeated. I went back to putting away dishes. Grabbed up the silverware rack. Yanked open the drawer. Started pelting forks, knives, spoons into their compartments so hard that the entire counter rattled. "It's no laughing matter, right?" I said, throwing the utensils one by one. "Nothing to poke fun at, right? Tell you what, Kim: You go get a terminal condition and I'll do some crying and asking why why why and maybe even get down on my knees for you. Otherwise, I'm just not in the mood."

Kim nodded once. "Okay," she said.

"Oh-fucking-kay," I said, and the cat, lying on its back with its feet up in the air, flipped and hurtled out of my way as I stomped from the room, intent on a long walk outside and away from there.

At work, a very distressed trucker called in to say that one of his tires had blown and the resulting shred of rubber thrown through the air in the rig's wake had caused a family-stuffed station wagon to go off the road. He was breathing as audibly as a long-

distance runner at the end of the final-mile hump. “Nobody got hurt, thank God,” he said. “Jesus, it happened so quick.” He recounted the details again while a mounting headache had me reaching for the pills, then finished with, “So, yeah, I guess you could send somebody to get a new tire on there. But tell ‘em to take their time. My nerves are shot.” I reached for a cup of water to wash the pills down and missed and a file box tipped and spewed white cards over the floor like the guts of a busted accordion. I let loose a string of profanities, trucker-style, and kicked the table’s underside and almost choked on one of the pills.

Howard stuck his head into the room. “Maybe you should call it a night there, Pete.”

“Are you insane? We got the first hospital bill today.” I shook my head. “This is where we find out how good those health and life insurance policies are, I guess.”

“Not too good, I gather,” Howard said.

“About as good as an IRS agent on your doorstep, Howard.”

Howard shook his head. “I always wondered if this company’s insurance would be able to cut the mustard when the chips were down,” he said.

“The chips are down, Howard,” I replied. Howard just nodded and then we were both on our knees on the floor, picking up index cards. “Anyways,” I told him, almost under my breath, “the company’s insurance was free. If someone would’ve been kind enough to tap me on the shoulder and say, ‘By the way, at age twenty-nine you’re going to discover that you have — let me get this right — a *glioblastoma multiforme* and only six to twelve months left to live,’ then by all means, buddy, I would’ve had a microscope on every available policy in the state. But that’s not the way it went.”

Before I left, Howard gave me a flowery, gold-lettered sympathy card that he and the other guys had all signed. Larry had printed his name in neat block letters and Ernie’s signature was nearly a straight line and illegible, but Howard’s was probably the most beautiful cursive I have ever seen, all loops and rolling hills. Howard watched for a second, then gave my shoulder a pat and headed for the office.

“Hey,” I called, “you should’ve gotten me a *get well* card, ya big lug.”

Howard didn’t have anything to say to that, but he shrugged and put on a good-natured smile. It occurred to me that he looked like his rightful place should be as a skipper on a sailboat, standing at the helm with a sailor’s cap and a hearty laugh as the wind filled the sails and sent us gliding over waves. “You take care,” he said and disappeared inside his office.

The headache didn't get any better and I puked twice, so I decided to quit early. I waited outside for Kim to pick me up. Standing there, watching my breath puff in clouds, I wanted a cigarette. I wanted a bottle of vodka. Shivering, I wanted Kim's hands on me. What happens when my body goes cold under those warm, soft hands? When the doctor shuts my eyes with his fingers and all the electronic equipment in the room becomes useless, who's going to hold my wife? Do they really cover your face with a sheet or is that just in movies? I have never been to a funeral, I suddenly realized, standing there outside the station, hands stuffed in my pockets. Every image I had of Kim had her standing, sobbing, before a gray headstone, alone. That was not what we'd signed up for. We had not gone through picking out reception halls and dresses and tuxes and color schemes and invitations and cakes for this.

When Kim pulled up and took me away in the car I noticed lines and faint bruises around her eyes, but her hair looked like it hadn't been slept on. "You couldn't sleep?" I asked.

"It might seem like it to you," she said, glancing over sympathetically, "but this is not something you are going through by yourself."

I got to sleep with her then, because she had been up all night, doing she wouldn't say exactly what. We lay under the covers in the spoons position to keep warm, because winter was fast approaching and our radiators had yet to kick on. I pressed my face into Kim's hair and I whispered that I was sorry for my outburst the day before and wrapped my arms around her so we'd be so close that not even air could get between us. Kim breathed and she glided her fingers up and down my arm, her love gradually snuffing out my head pain in a way that medication never could. For a moment everything was perfect, but then from the edge of sleep I heard Kim bring up the fact, speaking very softly, that my parents were still oblivious to my situation. I rolled over and lay on my back and stared, sighing, up at the ceiling.

Kim turned onto her other side so she could see me, but I made a point of not looking her way. "You're ambivalent about getting things taken care of," she said, her voice gentle and compassionate, allowing me no excuses for outbursts.

"I'm not ambivalent," I said. "I just don't want to do it."

"Most people are terrified that they'll die suddenly and everything will be left undone," Kim whispered, caressing my chest slowly. "Most people, if they get a five-minute's warning that death is coming, they'll say they'd give anything for just a little more time so they can tie things up before they go."

“That’s not what happened, though, Kim,” I insisted. “Those people who wish for more time — they don’t know what they’re saying. I’ve always had a vision of me getting creamed by a bus because I crossed the street with my head in the clouds. *Bam!* It’s over. I could live with that. I mean, you know.”

“But that’s not what happened either, Pete.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and the contours of the ceiling lit up imprinted against my lids. “My whole life is unfinished business,” I said, my voice nearly as soft as my wife’s. “And I want to keep it that way. I don’t want to find my enemies and make peace. I don’t want to forgive people who I still hold grudges against. I don’t want to finally say all the great things I always wanted to say but never did to all the people I love. Listen, this is my new philosophy — I just made it up,” I said, talking a little faster, a little louder. “Leave everything unresolved. Don’t let any details get tied-up. Throw closure to the wind. You start resolving major things in your life and somebody, whoever decides these things, decides that you have done what you were here to do and so now it’s time to go. This is my last hope. I won’t write a will, I won’t forgive anyone, I won’t give away a single prized possession. I won’t quit my job. We won’t move to the coast and buy a sailboat. Then they’ll have to let me stay.”

“Wonderful theory, honey,” Kim said. “But it’s flat-out denial.”

“No,” I corrected, “it’s taking everything with a grain of salt and tossing it over your shoulder.” And happy with that, I leaned over and kissed Kim on the cheek and went to sleep.

But it was only a couple nights later when that theory fell apart. Kim was driving me to work with rain pelting down and throwing steam up from the car hood when a shotgun blast jolted us both to attention and we were riding the *whump-whump-whump* of a blown tire. Kim pulled over to the shoulder and I told her to pop the trunk, but she didn’t want to do it. “It’s cold and wet,” she said. “I don’t think you’re in any condition —”

“I change truck tires, Kim,” I interrupted. “Mack trucks. Eighteen-wheelers. Sometimes bigger. I think I can handle a Honda Civic.” Kim sighed and popped the trunk and I hopped out of the car. Pulled out the spare, the jack, the tire iron. Pried free the hubcap. Loosened the lug nuts. Jacked up the car. Pulled off the flat. Fitted on the spare. Rain soaked the road and my back, running down my neck, a headache clawing to the surface. I lowered the car, tightened on the lug nuts. Picked up the hubcap and bumped my elbow on the flat and the hubcap hit the pavement and rolled

into the middle of the highway and clattered down and without thinking I went after it and when a pickup truck's headlights caught me I just stood still. The blaring horn loud in my ears. The desire to live pulsing through me like the diesel that fuels an eighteen-wheeler. Kim screaming at me to move, at God to make me move, at the oncoming pickup truck. All I could do was stand there. Jesus, it happened so quick! The headlights, the blaring horn, they swerved, they screamed by as tires squealed and clouds of rain swirled up glowing red in the braking truck's taillights. "Get outta the goddamn road, asshole!" came the shout, and the tires screamed again as the truck jerked away and sped on down the road.

I stood there, numb, drenched and bone-cold. Kim was out and running and I couldn't even understand her frantic words. I looked at her, the rain in rivulets down her pale face, the fear in her eyes, and suddenly time was back in motion, time, always in motion, and it all came down at once and I was painfully aware of just how fast time was going, how it was simply slipping away. "I just want it to stop, Kim," I said, my voice breaking. "I just want it to stop for a minute. Everything is just going too damn fast and I just want it to stop."

That was it. Next I was pressing my face into Kim's shoulder, collapsing against her. I felt her arms come up around me, pulling me close. She took me to the car, took the towel that usually served to keep the seat warm, and we used it to dry each other's faces. Both of us shivering, lips blue. Kim's hair hung around her face in wet dark strands, her glasses resting watermarked on the dashboard. "I'm just not ready," I said, teeth gnashing.

"Neither am I, Pete," she answered. "There's water on your neck yet. Here," she said, dabbing with the towel. "Here. Let me get this. You have to stay warm. Let me keep you warm," she said. "Let me keep you warm." We sat there together in the car at the side of the road for a long time. We let the other traffic whiz by. We just stayed right there.

Four to ten months, but we don't speak in those terms anymore. Anyway, there are treatments we can try, new discoveries every day. Even miracle cures. It's Dr. Yasserman who dropped that possible hope out to us: "Brain tumors are amazingly susceptible to miracle cures," he told me and Kim. "The odds aren't great, but it happens, more than should seem possible. And we don't know why. But it makes us happy when it does."

“It would make us happy too,” Kim said.

These days the headaches are more frequent, though, and the pain is something I can’t even describe. New symptoms have begun to appear: I get tremors, I can’t talk right. I’m on my way to being worthier of Klutzo’s name than Klutzo. Kim and I make more and more visits to the hospital. I know the names of all the regulars on the staff, and even Dr. Yasserman and I have become what you could almost call friends. Just the other day, for instance, I found out that he’s as much of a Springsteen fan as I am. Maybe more so. In the mid-80s he got his picture in Newsweek as one of the hundreds of people who had camped out days in advance to buy tickets for one of the stadium shows. He’d been to the earlier concerts, too, back when Bruce wasn’t so popular that he couldn’t go out into the audience and it was intimate and people had the patience to really listen to his stories. “Tell me about those shows,” I said. “I wanna hear every detail. Tell me everything I missed. Tell me so that it seems like I’m there.” And he did. “When Bruce played the piano,” Dr. Yasserman said, “it was so quiet in that hall you could hear the *clack* of the wood when he hit certain keys.” Dr. Yasserman sat and told me everything, and I closed my eyes and listened, arpeggio piano and hushed, clipped guitar notes filling my head.

Kim had herself a good cry last night. We were out walking. There were crickets and locusts. Moon was out. Railroad bridge over the river. She started talking about how none of this was fair and I had to agree. We held hands. We skipped stones across the water. I listened to Kim tell me about her day at the bakery, and when she did her imitation of a pinched-up, sour-faced customer I laughed and laughed. She laughed, too, and then she just started crying, and so I held her. I thought of all kinds of reassuring things to say, but none were really all that reassuring, so I kept quiet and just held her.

After we got home, I sat at the kitchen counter and picked up the phone, turned it over and over in my hands. In my parents’ time zone it wasn’t too late for a phone call yet. “This ain’t gonna be easy,” I said.

Kim touched my hand. “I’m right here,” she told me.

“Okay,” I said. “Just don’t go.”

“I’m staying right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I nodded. Then I took a breath, dialed the number, and waited. 