

Every Headache

by Jennifer Howard

It's possible that you're dying. *Every headache a brain tumor*, your friend once said. You laughed then. Now you begin to see what he meant. There is no certainty the lump is benign, no reason to think that the spot on the back of your hand is anything but melanoma. In a universe of worst-case scenarios, there is every chance you have something to worry about, months if not minutes to live. *Every headache a brain tumor*. And why not? What gave you the right to think that, because you once felt secure, that would always be the way of it? Not for you the winning ticket, the free pass, the narrow escape.

It began with an ache you couldn't quite identify. It was in the vicinity of your liver, your lung, your heart, some vital organ that sustains life and that, until now, you have taken entirely for granted. You knew it would pass. You would have been hard pressed to describe the symptoms, which were, after all, barely even symptoms. Just a sense of something...*off*, a barely felt disruption in the force field of your life. You might have said you were off your game, a little run down.

You took vitamins. You went to bed an hour earlier. You sought perspective and distraction. The ache would not be ignored. It was with you when you turned out the light and there again in the morning, a faithful invisible companion, curled up on your chest like a cat, each day a little heavier.

You could call your doctor. You don't call because you know that she, even more nervous than you are, will subject you to tests that will only lead to more tests. The medical establishment loathes a mystery. They won't let it rest. There will be scans and needles and inconclusive reports. You will drink unpleasant liquids that, X-rayed, will illuminate your insides without revealing a thing. Specialists and

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med students will gather at your bedside with clipboards and stethoscopes and talk with great earnestness about the peculiarities of your case. You will dwindle and diminish under their scrutiny. It is only at the end that you will understand how much you have to lose.

It is also possible that you are not dying. The shadow on the scan could be a thumbprint, the heaviness in your chest one last kiss from the ghost of your dead relationship. You could have years ahead of you, years in which you will date and marry and have children, decades to become the person you always thought you would be. There will be successes and paychecks. There will be mortgages and tuitions to pay. Life will anchor you, securely, in its web of commitments and obligations. You will be safe again. Why not you? Why not, why not?

