

# And It Is No Joke

*Conor Kelley*

It's like this: your wife's illness starts with something small. A headache. And it *was* just a headache. You both have a dozen headaches a month. Not that you're bragging about that.

But this one doesn't go away. It gets worse. And that makes you wonder, you know, *If I missed this, what else am I missing every day? Am I not paying attention to the most important things in my life?* There's so much to keep track of between your seventeen-year-old's SATs and soccer practices, and the dance recitals of your thirteen-year-old. Things just slip through.

Because nobody comes to you and says, *Here, this, this is the Good Shit, stop looking over there.* And the tall brunette with the nose freckles that don't fade in the winter and the little scar up by her hairline, the one you've built your life with, your whole being around, in your cluttered two-story with the giant elms in the backyard, she's the Good Shit.

She goes in to see the doctor on her lunch break, and you text her *Good luck, hon,* and she goes *With what? I'm not flying this plane.*

The next day, the message on the answering machine says you'd better come in. Both of you. You're ushered right into an open exam room, and you think the receptionists seem pretty somber, but you tell yourself maybe that's just you assuming the worst.

But in his office, the doctor gives you two the diagnosis, what that means, and how little time she has left.

And you realize you've been on the top of the rollercoaster for so long and hadn't glanced out once to admire the view, and you hear the car start creaking down now, and you want to say *Stop, stop right there, give me one more second,* but no way, this thing is in motion.

The word *terminal* is heavy. It crawls through your ear and lies on top of your brain, suffocating it, and you don't hear another

thing during the half-hour consultation. Your eyes can't focus. All you do is sit with your hands on your knees and you sweat. And when you lay a soaking hand on top of hers, she is blue cold like you've never felt.

And when you two are stumbling out of the office like a zombie bride and groom, the doctor puts his hand on your shoulder and stops you. He says, quietly, "Listen, Greg, you have to enjoy the time you two have left. You have to laugh. If you don't, this thing will eat you alive. You have two kids, right?"

And, sure enough, it starts eating you. Before you know it, she's really hurting, and she's leaning on you in a way that you recognize as familiar, because it's what you've done to her for two decades. On your worst days she's just another item on the list of things you need to take care of each morning. It's not shit-shower-shave-feed the kids-kiss her goodbye anymore, because that life has left without a proper farewell, off with the first light of morning, that life is just done with you now.

And you're not even cooking dinner for your kids anymore, 'cause your wife needs you with her on that couch as soon as you get home from work, because that one little headache has become this constant thrumming noise that she says gets louder the quieter the room is, so these days the television is always on, and nighttime is not for sleep any longer.

But this is not the time to beat yourself up, even when you recognize that this may be the first of decades of nights alone in this bed. Nor is this an appropriate time to stare at the blades in the medicine cabinet and contemplate a self-harm technique you're not really all that familiar with.

But you know what the results look like. Three weeks after you told the kids about the diagnosis you grab your son's hand to look at the raised line across the underside of his wrist that you were certain he didn't get from soccer, because first, it's winter, and second, it's a kicking sport, how dumb did he think you were?

You may say to yourself that, *Yes, the appeal is becoming clearer now*, but you have to follow that up with, *Greg, this is not the time to start acting out like a child*.

And later on you look back on those first few weeks and miss them. Because, oh, God, that rollercoaster is heading downhill fast now, and her first seizure happens during the night, and good thing you've been sleeping so lightly because you get out there with just enough time to wrap her up like you're the space blanket, and she's the crash survivor on the side of the road.

But before you cocoon her, your brain does this thing where it refuses to recognize that this is your limber, wisecracking, no-bullshit, state-champion athlete wife squirming on the ground and instead makes two crude comparisons.

First: the largemouth bass you hauled in last summer, on the floor of your boat.

Second: your daughter when she headbangs to your old Metallica albums to shake out the nerves on the car ride to recitals.

Of course you'll hate yourself forever for this; it will pull rare happy thoughts of yours back down to earth for a long, long time, but if there's anything you've learned at this point it's that the brain is surprising and not in the ways you hope.

Your doctor encouraged you that before her memory disappears, it's helpful to recall shared memories with her. The past is all you two can talk about now, because for the first time, you have no idea what the future will sweep your legs with next.

A night game at the ballpark in cool June.

Your daughter's first words.

The night both your kids slept over at friends' houses, and you two screwed like you didn't think you still had in you—which is the last time you two laid on this floor together like this.

At the two-month checkup the next day, her doctor suggests you take some time off to be with her. You do. Of course, you do. And at the firm, they understand, they don't even bat an eye at it, because one, they've already heard the whispers around town, and

two, they totally believe you, which *you* don't at all, because this feels like some sort of scheme you should be nervous about, where you made the whole thing up and the four of you disappear down to Mexico, running away from something vague but steadily pursuing you. All your feelings these days end up in fantasies like this.

So, instead of nodding at the correct times during meetings and setting company records for hours spent hiding on the john, you're back home every day. This gives you plenty of time together, but there's a sense that it's not earned the same way it was when you both worked, when the time was carved out, sacrificed for, squirreled away months ahead on the wall calendar in the kitchen. It feels like a forced playdate between two children whose mothers just want to drink white wine on Sundays and catch up.

All this time together is good for you two, but often leads to unfettered Googling on your respective laptops. You two begin casually using terms like *predilection* and *environmental trigger*, and you wonder whether you yourself have been this trigger. You decide that at the very least, you're complicit in creating an environment, a household, a mode of life, that's killing the one woman on this forsaken planet who you've danced naked for.

But here's a bright spot: the medicine helps. What killed our parents might not get us. Which is inspiring, that if you're on the right side of time, you can fight the disease. But if you're not, all you can do is fight the symptoms.

The medicine is good. The side effects are not.

Certain seizure medications cause severe weight gain, which may seem like a petty thing to complain about, but you're learning a lot about yourself at this point, about how petty and small and selfish you really are. In your most forgiving moments, you allow yourself quite a bit of slack to become depressed because you can't see your wife's face anymore, because her face has been covered up by this new swollen, clammy face—another thing gone.

Everything seems inevitable now. When your baseball team begins losing, even in spring training, even early in the game, you change the channel. You check the historical average temperature,

not the projected high. News that used to shock you, like school shootings and plagues and faraway beheadings, just...doesn't. In fact, you envy their quick deaths.

You don't think about what it will be like without her. You do think about those blades in the bathroom.

Can you believe the way you're thinking? No you can't. And you hate it.

But you keep going to the appointments at the hospital, and you remind yourself to smile, you even practice it in the mirror, because she sure isn't smiling anymore. And the MRI machine really is a fascinating thing, and when the doctors and nurses speak in awe about all the energy it shoots through the subject, you want to say, *Listen, motherfucker, that's my wife in there.*

And you feel an anxious knifing, followed by a burning embarrassment, with every slight tremor of her feet sticking out of the machine, misinterpreting it as another episode, but the staff at these hospitals really are attuned to your situation, emotionally speaking, and in the waiting room they walk you to, they really do a good job between the soothing soundtrack and the vinyl sofas.

The lights and the prescription pads and the wax paper and the gowns, they exhaust you; they make you look forward to collapsing on your bed, but you never sleep more than a couple hours because of the infomercials blaring from the living room.

*Limited time offer.*

*Act now.*

*But wait, there's more.*

The days pile up, they stick together, and you feel the roles around the house changing. Your kids, boy, if you could just take a step back from it for a second you'd say to yourself, *Who are these two little people?* The oldest drives himself everywhere, without an accident or anything, at least that you know of.

And who knew the youngest could make pancakes? She leaves a plate of them on the table by the couch when she leaves for school one day. They sit until the afternoon. Before she gets home, you eat them and tell her that mom liked them, she really did.

I mean, it's not all sweet—your little girl starts forging your signature on permission slips, and the oldest seems pretty baked every time you see him—but you see that this is a huge thing for them, it will make them whoever they turn out to be, and they're growing up so fast they're mostly caught up with you.

During one of your research binges, you stumble across an online community that provides support for people like you. Support groups for supporters. Though these days you feel more like a jockstrap supporter than any other kind. These sites are free, plus you don't have to use your real name. You just put it out there. And these people, they're all so far down the road, they don't bat an eye at anything.

Your wife goes down for a nap on a sunny March late morning, and you make tequila sunrises until you have to shush yourself, because waking up your dying wife with your warbling, scowling rendition of *The Eagles* is really, truly rock bottom. Then you catch a glimpse of your laptop sitting open on the kitchen island.

On the discussion board, you type:

*I hate this world that's taking my wife away from me, and I would rather kill myself than try to live without her.*

The page publishes the comment as soon as you hit the return key. You didn't want to send just that, you had something sweet to say afterwards to balance it out, you just wanted a paragraph break, and now you want to take it back immediately. So you refresh the page and scroll down to your comment, and oh shit, there's already a comment to your comment.

*Join the club,* it says.

And, Christ, you break into a laugh so hard you cough, and you cough so hard you bust a sweat. You have to go through the sliding glass door out to the deck to keep from waking her up with your laughing and coughing and your sobbing. In the cold morning air, a cloud comes out of you.

You can get on these things for hours, and people all over the country, the world even, they're airing out their dirty laundry, and it's all so therapeutic. The people who come off all

holier-than-thou get called Saints and there's nothing worse to be called.

You start sharing all your stuff, and the good and the bad, it all runs together, because you're no Saint.

And everybody laughs.

They add you to this email thread full of jokes about death, your new obsession, and you appreciate that *ding* on your laptop each morning around 10 a.m., after the kids have left the house and it's just you two, but one morning all the fun drains from that when you come back from the bathroom and she's in her robe, bent over your computer with her mouth hanging open, reading today's joke.

*Two hunters are tiptoeing through the woods when one drops to the ground. He's stiff as a board, his eyes rolled back in his head.*

*His friend pulls out his cell phone and calls 911.*

*"Help!" he says. "I think my friend is dead! What should I do?"*

*The operator calmly says, "Take it easy. I'm here to help. First, let's make sure he's dead."*

*"Okay, okay, hold on," says the hunter.*

*On the line, there's a gunshot.*

*He comes back to the phone. "Alright, now what?"*

She is not pleased. But you fight hard for this one bright spot, to stay on this site, to share with somebody, and you explain to her that this is the only time people will breach the top layer with you, and not like when they call the house to say stupid shit like, "How are you?"

And as the words come out, you can't imagine how stupid you could possibly sound. My God, you made it about you. How did you manage?

So you improv it, you just keep the words flowing out as long as you can—*yes, and then; yes, and then*. You cover that corner of the house in a layer of your bullshit, and after a while she kind of sighs, maybe a seed of a smirk. You're just free-associating by now, and when you run out of ideas, you launch into this joke they sent you a couple weeks ago.

*Bob and Lenny are good friends. Bob has to take a weeklong business trip to Indianapolis. So he asks Lenny to stay over with his cat Missy and his elderly mom.*

*“Sure,” Lenny says. “I’ve got nothing else to do.”*

*So, the next night Bob calls up this goofball Lenny. “Len-man!” he says. “How’s my kitty cat doing?”*

*“Oh, Missy?” Lenny says. “She’s dead.”*

*“Dead?!” Bob yells. “Jesus, Lenny, don’t just out and tell me that—you could’ve given me a heart attack. Next time, make it gradual. Tell me she got up on the roof, then tomorrow say she’s getting chased around by raccoons or something, and then when I get home just say she ran away. Take it easy on me, you know.”*

*And Lenny goes, “Oh, Bob. Gosh, I’m so sorry. I’m so bad at this stuff.”*

*“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Bob says. “It’s just a cat anyways. Where’s Mom?”*

*Lenny takes a deep breath. “Well, she’s up on the roof with that raccoon, and they’re talking about running away together.”*

Get this: your wife throws her head back and cackles.

Which is such a great turn of events for you. Listen: laughter is weird, right? A bark that releases endorphins. But it feels great, and you’re doing it together, which feels even better, and you two collapse into a pig pile on the mat by the sliding door, and afterwards, when the barks have faded to little yelps and you’re both worn out, you clear your throat.

You say, “Tell me what it feels like.”

But here’s the thing: what a stupid question. Because what’s a better use of her remaining time, which is only a couple weeks according to her last check-up? Talking about the pain, the dizziness, the lack of appetite? Insomnia, nausea, fear? I hope to hell you married up, smarts-wise, like I did, and she won’t even respond to your question.

Then, instead, she just gives you the other side of the last twenty years, what you didn’t see. How when you first asked her out, at Jimmy Lasso’s party your junior year, you smelled like you’d bathed in Brut. How her dad hated your guts until he met your parents and learned you’d been walking his daughter

home from school every day a mile out of your way. That she was never like those girls who kept cutouts of wedding dresses until she met you, and a month later, she was halfway through a scrapbook.

That, when you popped the question, she almost asked if she could think about it.

That she hated the patchy mustache you started wearing after you two got engaged.

That she knew, with no doubt, that you were *The One* when you took her hand on the altar with a razor-burnt, bare upper lip.

And that she's sorry the kids turned out to be dancers and soccer players like her and can't throw a baseball worth a damn.

You two doze off on the linoleum, and she mumbles in her sleep, "Protect the house." And you nod and kiss her on top of her bald head, right on that scar, but who knows what that fucking means. But also: who cares.

It's the last full sentence she speaks.

The next few days are a whirlwind. Her speech goes—fast, God, so fast—and one day, a Thursday afternoon, she knocks a glass from the coffee table onto the ground to get your attention. Something is wrong. Very.

You carry her like a fireman downstairs to the car. You go in your sweatpants.

The kids bring you a change of clothes that night.

You sleep in the hospital leaning on your hand two nights in a row.

You all go home on Sunday.

All three of you that are left.

At the funeral, all the folks who've been calling the house come to shake your hand in the front pew, and you don't have anything new to say after the first couple, and none of them had much to say at all, so you just put your head down and let them pat you on the shoulder on their way by.

You don't think you've got enough to speak, but during the pastor's closing statements, you pick your head up and amble, unannounced, to take the podium from the old man.

You tell a joke.

*Kristen and Greg were huge baseball fans. They went to games together, watched their team on TV, and spent the winter months talking about what the next season was going to look like for the old ballclub.*

*They agreed whoever died first would come back to tell the other if there was baseball in heaven.*

*A few years later, Kristen got sick and passed away. A few nights after that, Greg woke to the sound of Kristen's voice.*

*"Kristen!" he said. "Is that you?"*

*"Of course it's me," Kristen replied.*

*"Unbelievable! You came back for me! Tell me, is there baseball in heaven?"*

*And Kristen said, "Well I've got good news and bad news. The good news is there's baseball in heaven, yes. We've got a good team."*

*So Greg said, "That sounds great! What could possibly be the bad news?"*

*"You're pitching tomorrow night," she said.*

These types of jokes do *not* go over well at funerals. People don't know what to do. They certainly can't laugh, but the silence is unbearable, so a few of them clap. And it's funny, in a big church, the way scattered applause sounds like a lonely little bat found its way through an open window and started bashing itself against all the corners of the ceiling.

You let her parents host the wake at their house. After an hour or so, you can't take looking at another goddamn photo album. It drives you nuts. You go to the bathroom and throw haymakers in the dark. Then you go to the kitchen and you tell your son, whose face just looks absolutely busted up, "Finish your beer, get your sister, we're going home."

You don't say anything about him drinking, because you will *not* allow yourself to lose him too, and he sees how fucked up you are and puts his arm around you, and you're both swallowing a lot and clearing your throats, anything to avoid starting the crying

before you even get back to your own house. It's pretty clear you're both figuring out what the Good Shit is, and there's just this sense, this new sense, of you and him being not so much father and son anymore but close friends that went through hell together and, oh yeah, one of you has changed the other's diapers.

You let him drive. Your daughter sits in the backseat and doesn't say anything for a long while, just rests her head on her arms up against the glass and stares out the window, and from the side mirror you can't tell if she's tracking anything or is just letting it all roll over her. Or maybe she's doing that thing she told you about a few years ago, where she pretends a little ball of light is following the car, bouncing from the light pole down to the street and back up to the next one. Maybe she's outgrown that by now. You hope not.

Your son rests his forehead on the steering wheel at a red light, and when the car behind yours honks at the light change, he throws a jab to the stereo that cuts his hand open.

"Hey!" you yell out of obligation, but you don't have anything else to say. It was a nice punch.

A few minutes later, your daughter leans forward and asks, very quietly, "Dad, have a catch when we get home?"

You two get out there, because who are you to turn down the first time in a year she's wanted to touch a piece of sports equipment. She wears your son's old glove. He watches from the porch with his hand wrapped up in a paper towel and his arms sternly folded, and you can tell on the inside he's just beaming, but you know he would never admit it.

It takes a few big arm circles for you to feel in any way competent to throw this baseball straight, but after a little while, you say to yourself, *Alright old man, get this show on the road*, because you really are starting to feel old with all the creaking of your knees and shoulders. You sound like a rocking chair, and you feel like someone who sits in one.

Your daughter has this look of determination on her face, because she knows this is a Big Deal to Daddy, and she has this

graceful dancer balance to her, she will have this way about her the rest of her life, but when she steps with the wrong foot you see it and you go, *Oh God*, because she's got as little of an idea how to throw a baseball as her older brother does.

The ball crashes over the leaves past you—this throw was a thing of blooper reels—and it bounces off the house. Your son busts up laughing, high-pitched and innocent in the damp air. It surprises the hell out of all three of you.

“Hey!” she says and throws the floppy glove at him.

You chase the thing down. When you get to it you notice the old seam marks that dot the shingles on the house from the first thousand times you tried to turn your son into something he wasn't.

It hits you between the eyes: *Protect the house*, your wife said, and you realize you're married—still married—to the funniest corpse on the God damned planet. She was a step ahead of you, she always was, and you hope she always will be.

This knocks you on your ass. And it doesn't mean you miss her any less, but you hope to hell that you won't need to get your arm in shape for a while. You love it here.

“Dad?” your daughter asks from the other side of the yard. “What are you doing sitting on the ground?”

Your butt's soaked. You won't stop laughing. ☺