Room 10

by Volker

It took 17 years to write this down.
Kim man, wherever you are, I hope there’s a Billiard’s table there.
And Doreen. Thank you.

There was a problem with my right ear, and after the doctor had already tried to do everything that an ENT specialist in fact can, he decided that one could install a so-called tympanostomy tube and he did just that. That was my first general anesthesia and I still remember the feeling when I woke up after that. It was cold and I lie there, naked but for the hospital gown, and felt pretty crappy. After that, the problem with the ear was at least gone, but the doctor had overlooked something that he should have never overlooked and for which my father would have loved to sue him for years to come…if not do something worse.

“Nasopharynx Carcinoma” is what the doctor with the brown hair and horn-rimmed glasses called it. That was in November 1997 and I didn’t have the faintest clue what she meant. I sat there, in Fribourg, far away from Lake Constance, where I come from, and simply listened. She said it had not metastasized and I did not know the term. She supposed that we should start the treatment soon and that I would still have to undergo a surgery and she asked if I knew what cancer is. I had no idea.

I woke up. Noticed that there was something there that wasn’t there before. A tube that went all the way down from the carotid artery into the chest and that would enable them to administer injections without the need to “poke you”. So they called it. It felt strange. And it was cold again when I woke up from the anesthesia.

Room 10. That is where I lie. Beside me was D., a small, blonde boy, much younger than I. Leukemia, he said. I understood nothing. Of anything. I just lie there. And the infusions came. Chemo, I knew-- my uncle had cancer and survived years before me, even if it looked bad. Maybe it was because of the genes, they said. They can never be ruled out. The days went on and I lie in bed with this clear solution dripping into me, as well as saline and an armada of pills that I was supposed to take. The yellow one always made me puke and to this day, I still have an aversion to the color yellow. Dad helped me hide them in the bedside table and then whenever no one was looking, he’d smuggle them outside and throw them away somewhere. Mom and he lived in the Parent’s House, a facility next to the clinic that was funded by donations. Whenever possible, I could go over. It was rarely possible.

Kim was damn good at billiards. In fact, the pool table was the only constant those days. It stood in the hallway, next to the elevator that brought people to the third floor. The people who get out there always know what awaits them. The second was dialysis, the third was cancer patients. Kim was older, about 19 or something and I got along with him, even when he always cleaned me out [at the pool table]. He had his own line and before I knew it, I was always back at the end of it. We stood there, with these rolling drip devices from which our drugs came, and played billiards long into the night. The food we denied regardless—that's how disgusting it was. The wagon with all the warmed-up stuff inside it came every day at noon, and eating that shit was always just an easier way to make yourself vomit. Vomitting had, in any case, become a part of daily life. In the beginning it was two or three times an hour, and later it was several times. At that point there isn't any puke left, only transparent, slightly greenish bile. It just burns and hurts and even the Morphine-drip they have set-up next to you no longer helps anymore. Sure, you can always push on it and get an extra shot, but it doesn't make it any better. It only allows you to fade a little further away. You don't sense anything anymore. No hunger, no thirst, nothing. The solution of fat that, in the meanwhile, has been set up next to you, ensures that you have everything you need. Revolting, cum-white stuff that slowly flows into you.

D. wasn't lying next to me anymore, but another boy. Stomach cancer, he said. Around Christmas, he was let out and went straight to a disco [dance club]. That cost him his stomach, because he picked up an infection and when you have cancer, you have no immune system. I never saw him again.

I was allowed to go home as well. Days before, a box had come with letters from all of my classmates. They wished me a good recovery, and they hoped that I would come back soon. Days before Christmas 1997, when I left my bed for the first time, I couldn't stay standing up and flopped over. The last time I had stood was four weeks before that, maybe longer.

I was Patient 36 with this type of cancer in Germany, according to the so-called "Aachener Study", which was conducted on children and which stipulated that they were treated with three rounds of Chemotherapy, Radiation and a half year of interferon. I knew nothing about it. Either way, I wasn't really there. I was just lying there, Christmas was over and I spent the days lying on my parent's couch and many people came and cried and gave me money and even then, I wondered if that was all they could do: give money. I was 13 and suddenly had just over 3,000 Deutsch Marks in my possession, which I could not give a single shit about and which did not help me in the least.

And then there was the question about what I wanted for Christmas. When you have cancer, they fulfill all of your wishes, because they think that will do your recovery well, and maybe it even does. Anyway. I wanted a Nintendo 64. And I got one. With Mario, Wave Race, and later Goldeneye, which we imported specially from Austria, because it was indexed in Germany, and at the time that still meant something. After New Years, I was back in Room 10. Chemo number two. D. was back next to me, and even though he was actually annoying, I found him pretty okay.

You get a psychologist at your side, for whatever reason. Presumably so that you survive without permanent damage. She was 29, just graduated from university and I actually liked her more than I wanted to talk to her about anything. Freud is probably laughing at that now and thinking that this is all screwed up. It's only partially because she took away my Goldeneye, because she knew it was indexed and I wasn’t allowed to have it. Later, I got it again and she knew full well and still did not say anything. Instead of that, I usually sat at her computer, which had the internet, which at that time was something completely new. Windows 3.1, an equivalently awful browser, but you could surf it. I thought that was exciting. She said that I should write about the games I had been playing.

So that you don’t get held back in school, they make a homeschool teacher available to you. She was far too old to understand my generation, but we got along. She would help me keep up with math, English, German, etc. and thought that at some point, I should write about games. There was a ward newspaper, a simple sheet, photocopied and passed on to all who wanted it, nothing more. I wrote. About "Anno 1602", my first review in this sense. Funnily enough the woman, who at the time did PR for that game, would be my superior 15 years later.

I spent my days playing games and painting bags. Stupid, but a distracting activity. I painted N64 logos on them, the "Turok" writing, "Super Mario" and stuff like that. It distracted me for at least a few hours. Chemo number two was not as bad as the first one. At least at the outset.

Then my hair fell out.

You lose all of your hair. Absolutely all of it. From that point on, you can tell if any person in the world is just bald or if they have cancer. You never lose that. The boys take it less hard than the girls. They cry and cry and cry and J. and I became friends, even if I would never see her again. She was wearing her headscarf with pride and impressed me. She didn’t let that shit get her down.

Neither did S. I met him in the dining room, and his right eye was totally twisted and I asked him if he had the right perspective. He told me that a tumor was behind his eye and he would have had two weeks left to live, if it hadn’t been noticed. We were great friends. I miss the blasphemous trouble I got into with him, if only because he was older and because he took everything in stride and we had fun together.

Kim wasn’t there anymore. Never again. I heard about his death from Dr. B., who said that it was sad, but I should not give up hope.

My dad gave up smoking around that time. He never started again, although at the time he had been smoking over two packs a day for 30 years. Meanwhile, I read a lot of magazines about games, wrote a lot about games, still eagerly painted bags and managed chemo number three a little better. It was really not that bad, the puking held off, I was able to eat again. Not the crap they had in the hospital, but at a restaurant in Fribourg called "Paradise" or something like that, which was located next to the children's cancer ward. I could stay home longer and there it went pretty well. Teachers came over, it was clear that I would pass that grade. Somehow, they'd make sure of it.

Radiation began and that was the most comfortable part. Once a day, a taxi drove me from the Children's Hospital only a few meters over to where the device was in which I would lie down for two minutes. I would put on a mask which was full of holes, so I probably looked like Jason from the horror film. The amount was 57.8 Gray, a significant dose, and I still remember the bitter taste in my mouth when the ticking started and the unit started up. Nevertheless, it was okay, so I had the rest of the day off and was able to gamble with S. or goof around or read comics or whatever else. I was often at the Parent's House and Mom was there and when she was not crying, it was fine, she was cooking and I had something real to eat and somehow made it through. She told me that there were many people praying for me and I even prayed often and then later people said that God had made all this healing possible and although I truly did not understand that at all, it made sense at the time. Maybe God really was there.

The dentist said that my teeth could fall out in less than three years. As a result of radiation therapy and because I didn't really take care of them. But he would take care of them. He had two PhDs and two different MD titles and was the boss in the shop and did what he could. To date, none of my teeth have fallen out.

April, I was able to return home. I could leave, Room 10 was history and after that, I only had to go to Fribourg once a week, to one of three weekly infusions of interferon. Dad drove, I played cassettes and he was terribly annoyed by my music. We had a good time. Most of the time, we'd go to eat afterwards, usually in "Paradise", which always had a really good Schnitzel. I started gaining weight again, after I had eventually gotten down to 35 kg (77 lbs). Indeed, I had no hair to speak of, but I instinctively knew that it was all up from there. I rarely saw S. and if I did, then we grinned and made fun of everything around us. It was a more relaxed time.

That half a year passed pretty quickly and I went back to school. On my cap was a kangaroo, and underneath it said "Skippies", whatever that was, and at the time I didn't care. The teacher insisted that I leave it on. When I came in, the first time in almost half a year, there was absolute silence in the room. I did not come back as the same person who had been torn away in October 1997. Everyone knew it. No one said anything.

It was the summer of 1998, and Mama felt the need to coddle me with strawberries and vanilla pudding. I devoured the stuff. I couldn't eat anything else anyway, because my mouth had been destroyed by radiation. I had virtually no saliva and it would stay that way for the next few years. In my early 20s, it returned to normal.

The six months of interferon went by. I was happy to be in Fribourg that one time a week. I would be able to complete the route myself in my own car five years later for my last check-up. I was to be the example from the "Aachener study" of someone for whom the suggested therapy had best worked. I was to be discharged 100% cured. And that damn tube in my chest could only be removed with local anesthesia, which at that time among us kids was a test of bravery: Cowards accept full anesthesia, local anesthesia is for the brave. I joked with the doctors while they pulled the tube out of my chest. I joked a whole lot in general. Maybe that was the best way to cope with the situation. There was never a taboo. Patient 36 talked about it quite readily. About everything.

2002, medical exam. I submit my file from Fribourg to the doctor, I know that this will get me the T5, so the free ride, nothing Civilian, nothing to do with anything else. We are in Donaueschingen (Do no eshing in) and it's a balmy spring day and he reads through the file and says in broken German with a Polish accent something like "You know, for me, cancer is a disease like any other. The healing just takes a little longer.” I say nothing. But I agree with him anyway.