

“There’s a shadow in your head”

Eric Baumann, a healthy 34-year-old, in love with life and his new girlfriend, had just started as the new London correspondent for the Swiss daily *Tages-Anzeiger* when he was diagnosed with brain cancer. His description, republished here, of the seven tumultuous days that changed everything, and how he still manages to retain his love of life, won him a Best Cancer Reporter Award.

Wednesday 29 December 2004. I’m lying on a bed in the emergency room of Zurich University hospital. It’s just before midnight. In a few minutes I’ll turn 34. A salty solution is flowing into my arm. I wait impatiently for the result of the X-ray. Hopefully this fuss will soon be over. Then I will celebrate my birthday with some friends. It can’t be anything dramatic. Pulse, blood pressure, reflexes – all OK. It’s just that headache.

I see four doctors coming towards me. Their faces are gloomy. “There is a shadow in your head,” one says. “It could be an infection – or a brain tumour.” My girlfriend squeezes my hand, shocked. I want to wake up from this nightmare, but I am already awake.

I’m only supposed to be in Zurich for a couple of days. In early December, I flew to London to start a new job as a correspondent for the Swiss *Tages-Anzeiger*. It was tough at first. Finding a flat seemed impossible. Above all, I missed my girlfriend – we had met in August.



Eric Baumann

One week after arriving, bad headaches woke me up in the night. It was not a hangover and I never had migraines. I thought the new environment and the distance to my fresh love was to blame. Painkillers brought relief for a couple of

hours. I wrote articles and found a small flat in London’s East End. The first evening I wanted to inaugurate my new place with a glass of wine in the bath. A headache attack got me out of the water.

Headache was not the only symptom. Since July, several times I had completely lost my ability to speak for a few minutes. I knew what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t catch the words, they just danced around me. I blamed it on stress and heavy partying. Months later doctors told me this is called ‘speech arrest’ – very common with brain tumours.

Around Christmas I flew back to Switzerland. On Christmas day I went to see my general practitioner. He confirmed the headache could be linked to my disc damage. He prescribed a tranquiliser.

In the evening, I went to my brother and his wife, we celebrated together with my father. It was the third Christmas without my mother. She died of cancer in 2002.

When I had woken up on this Wednesday, lines appeared in zigzag on my

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left eye. I booked an appointment with an eye specialist. Then I went to have lunch with a friend. The headache came back, I felt dizzy. I asked for the bill – when the waitress came I saw her twice.

The eye specialist seemed to think I was a hypochondriac. He said the eye problem and the headache were not connected, and prescribed some drops.

I felt a bit better in the afternoon, but my girlfriend urged me to go to the emergency unit. There they X-rayed my head.

Thursday 30 December 2004. Six in the morning. A nurse opens the curtains. It's still dark outside. At night they had pushed me through a tunnel system to the neurosurgical ward. That's when I became a patient for the first time.

I get up, rubbing my eyes. My roommate is an old man – he's in good spirits: "Breakfast is the highlight of the day!" I would like to hide somewhere.

I'm glad when they come to pick me up. I'm wheeled through the hospital complex, from one test to the next. I still can't believe what's going on. I'm so shocked by it all and befuddled by medication that I haven't yet worked out what impact this will have on my life. Will my girlfriend stay with me? How will my friends react? Who



tells my office? How long will I have to stay in hospital? But I'm aware that this is so big I can be happy just to be alive.

I have to get into a tube for an MRI. The machine cuts my head into virtual layers and turns them into negatives. When I see them, I choke. On the left temporal lobe I can easily spot the long, white shadow a doctor had mentioned the day before. An enormous swelling surrounds it, trying to protect my brain. However, space in a head is limited. Its content is being squashed to the right. No doubt, it's a brain tumour, says the senior doctor. Its diameter is four centimetres and it is spreading in all directions. I need an operation as soon as possible.

On the magnetic resonance image, I see my birth date: 30-12-1970, and the date of the picture: 30-12-2004.

Until now I used to think, 'how tragic', when I heard of diseases like this. I con-

sidered myself to be so fit and healthy I was convinced I would never have to face such a fate. Now I have to deal with an expanding growth in my body, with my own cells revolting against me. It's happening in my brain, the centre of my personality.

I'm too exhausted to deal with all the people trying to contact me and ask me questions. Yet it's so important for me to see they care. Their support gets me through these days. My girlfriend is the biggest help. She spends as much time with me as possible; she waits this and every evening in the hospital room until I'm asleep.

Friday 31 December 2004. I'm being pushed to more tests in a wheelchair. Cortisone reduced the swelling in my head. The pain is gone. Even the zigzag lines are less visible.

In the afternoon I am informed about the operation. It will take place in three

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days: January 3rd, Monday morning. Yashuro Yonekawa, director of the neuro-surgical clinic, will do it. For the first time I hear that I won't be fully anaesthetised. Maybe I got something wrong.

Sunday 2 January 2005. If the situation were different, I would return to London today. Instead, I have an appointment with the surgeon. He tells me I'll be awake during the operation. So I did get it right. If it's not clear whether cells are part of the tumour, a mild electric shock will be put on them and I will be asked questions at the same time. If I answer late or not at all, they are important. This way they can avoid cutting too much out.

To think of my skull being opened is scary enough. Witnessing it makes things worse. At least the surgeon has an international reputation, I'm told. I must sign a contract listing meticulously all the risks of the operation. I don't feel like reading it.

The night shift nurse tells us some nasty anecdotes from the operation room. I don't mind. He makes me laugh several times and makes it feel as if I am on the staff side and not a patient. Later I take a sleeping pill for the first time in my life.

Monday 3 January 2005. Woken at six again. Under the shower I think this is the last private moment before my execution. Before the operation, a speech therapist tests me to check how long I take to answer questions under 'normal' circumstances.

A doctor puts a catheter into my chest. He injects pain killers and a mild anaesthetic. I can't feel that my head is being screwed onto the operation table. Nor that somebody is cutting a half moon into the skin on the left side of my skull. The

cut part is laid over my ear. A quadrangle the size of a playing card is sawn out of the bone, wrapped up in gauze and put into a chromium bowl.

During the operation, I doze. It feels as if there is an empty box in my head and somebody is poking at it with a spoon. In fact it's the surgeon, removing tumour cells with a mini vacuum cleaner.

The closer the surgeon moves to the brain cells with his device, the more important the work of the speech therapist gets. She asks me to count from 1 to 20 and then backwards, from 20 to 1. She shows me drawings, for example of a comb or a table. I have to name them. Sometimes I hear her say "latency". It usually stands for the time span between a trigger and its reaction. During the operation, however, it means that I take too long to respond or that my answer is not correct. Which shows the surgeon he has to take special care, otherwise I might lose the ability of counting or remembering words.

The word 'latency' will always remind me of the days in the hospital that turned my life into a 'before' and an 'after'.

The team in the theatre manages to remove almost all the tumour cells in the three-hour operation. The sawn out piece is reattached to the skull with titanium screws, the piece of skin sewn on the cutting line. I'm pushed to the intensive care room. I think the stress is over. It's just as well I don't yet know what's still to come.

I want to sleep for a very long time. No chance. A nurse wakes me up every hour to make sure I'm not in a coma and I don't have a haemorrhage. He shines a torch into my eye, I have to tell him my name and my birth date and I have to push my feet against his hands.

I'm starting to feel the pain and I ask the nurse for a stronger medicine. He gives me Vilan, a drug similar to morphine. The effect quickly wears off. I ask for more. The nurse gives it to me. The painkiller loses its once intense effect. Hour after hour the same kind of torment. I just want to get away from here.

Tuesday 4 January 2005. At lunch time I can finally leave intensive care. I don't feel like eating. My jaw hurts. A nurse explains that my chewing muscles were cut in the operating room to have better access to the tumour. Later on a doctor sewed them together.

In the afternoon I'm asleep on the ward. A phone call from the hospital reception wakes me up. My health insurance is refusing to pay for the operation because I had officially left Switzerland. The horrible news pumps adrenaline through my blood. I had made sure before I left that I would remain insured. Even if the catastrophic message is correct, I would rather deal with it later. It turns out to be just a misunderstanding at a bad time.

I fall asleep again. In my dreams I play a videogame against a friend. If you hit the other player on his chest, you steal his force. I beat him forcefully. My opponent, screaming, turns into a creature covered with a shell full of bristles. With a groan, he falls into my arms and breathes his last. I tremble when I wake up.

I realise I might soon be dead. I don't want to think about it too much, I prefer to imagine a happy future with my girlfriend.

Wednesday 5 January 2005. The pressure in my head had been building up in the months before the operation – now it's

gone. It feels as if happiness hormones have been poured into my brain. My body surprises me too. I'm fed up with hospital food, I long for fresh vegetables and pasta cooked *al dente*.

Despite eating double portions, I lose several kilos. And I can't even go to the toilet. Later, a medical expert explains that phenomenon: the operation weakened my body so much that my metabolism just can't get enough nourishment.

A nurse takes the intravenous drip out of my wrist. Finally I can shower again without a plastic bag around my arm.

In the evening, a few friends pass by – in their car. I make my escape for two hours. Putting on jeans feels adventurous. I cover the bandage over my left ear with a woollen hat. We go to a bar full of young people. Despite the heat, I leave my head covered. The skin around my eye is swollen and purple. I look like I have been beaten up. People stare. But I almost jump to the ceiling from the sheer joy of being back in life.

This makes it a particularly hard landing when they tell me the results a couple of days later. The cancer is a glioblastoma multiforme. There is no brain tumour with a faster growth rate. After its removal, a few leftover cells are enough to cause a new outbreak. Life expectancy: on average barely one and a half years. A nurse tells me secretly that patients with this diagnosis are nicknamed "poor bastards" in the clinic.

"Forget about an old age pension," a speech therapist tells me in a shrieking voice, four days after the operation. I just



need to relax, but she does an ultra-heavy test with me. She's not satisfied with the results: "A journalist should be smarter." There is a time bomb ticking, she says, and I should think carefully about what to do with the limited amount of time I have left.

The love of my girlfriend more than makes up for such a lack of empathy. But the brain tumour is threatening something fundamental in me. I'm generally brain focused. Journalism is my profession – also a vocation. The cancer is spreading in my speech centre. Providence or coincidence? Shall I take it as a sign, and devote myself to other things?

Despite radiotherapy the tumour is back a few months later. Without treatment, I'm told, the growth will double in size every month. I begin chemotherapy, against my previous convictions. According to my doctor, this is why I'm still here.

The cure is a curse and a blessing. Temozolomide is the name of this drug – it arrived on the market a few years ago. The long-term effects are unknown. I take it in a four-week cycle, swallowing pills for five days and then taking a break for 23

days. I also need constant medication to prevent epileptic fits caused by the tumour.

The immediate reaction to this kill-or-cure remedy is better than might be feared. My appetite, my hair, my sense of balance – it's all here. I soften side-effects with alternative therapies, but despite acupuncture, anthroposophic medicine and Qigong, I feel sick during each pill cycle. My white-blood-cell count falls and I need a sleep during the day.

I carry on with chemotherapy. The last few tests have shown good results. My tumour has not disappeared, but it's shrunk. My doctors warn me not to miss even a single chemo cycle, but nobody knows if the tumour will one day become immune to the remedy and carry on growing.

The idea of taking on a job in London is out of my mind. It is better to stay in my home country. I write articles again every now and then. My girlfriend and I are still very happy.

It may sound corny, but I live every day as if it were the last one. Small things make me happy, like the special way sunlight looks on a winter day. At the same time, I behave as if I didn't have to fear an end. For instance I book travel a long time ahead. That way I keep hope alive.

More than three years after his operation, Eric Baumann remains well and has reduced his medication from every 4 weeks to every 8 weeks.

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