

These days I often wake up in a state of half-cooked consciousness, in which dream, memory and the perception of my physical surroundings merge together in a volatile, corrupt, soon to be forgotten mash.

*Where the hell am I?*

Features of my parents house or my childhood bedroom merge with those of the apartment where I am currently staying. You may be familiar with this feeling when you change sleeping places. The brain (or whatever part of the brain is in charge for this early morning or late night shift) is inert. Half asleep, it tries to make sense of things with what is left of its working memory. Where is the nearest toilet or window? What would I see behind the curtain? The nervous system automatically provides information that isn't necessarily useful. For a minute or so, it constructs a place that is inconsistent, maybe scary and quite trippy.

A. had moments like that, but of different length and solidity. Diagnosed with glioblastoma, a severe and always fatal form of brain tumor, A.'s memory and language skills changed drastically. Like wildly rewriting the code of a JPEG file with a text editor, his perception may have become somewhat glitchy and ghostly. During one of his many hospital stays in 2022, we were told that he had jumped into someone else's bed after going to the toilet because he had simply forgotten which one he had slept in before. During another, he ran away in his hospital shirt and ended up buying a cake from the bakery, where he was caught by a nurse. They told us that story just like the kindergarten teacher once told K. that I peed into the paddling pool back when I was 5. A.'s attitude and behavior changed from that of an overconfident, patriarchal boomer to a sweet, grateful, boyish little creature. And with that, my role became more of a parental figure than a son. I guess that's quite a classic: »You wiped my ass back then - I wipe yours now« (Though I am really not sure if he ever did actually). All the anger and annoyance I had felt for him before transformed into unconditional love. Having to live with the constant fear of seeing him for the very last time changes everything. And there was simply very little left to dislike. Now he was suddenly asking about my friends, about my partner, talking about how thankful he was for being cared for by us and for his life in general. It was a sad but very sweet and precious time I spent with him that year. A. passed away around 9 months after his diagnosis and left K. alone.

Suffering from depression since A.'s diagnosis, K. soon felt overwhelmed by the immense silence in the house. Having been together for 30 years means that she'd lived less time without him than with. Everything she could see was related to A. and their relationship. The house appeared as a giant assembly of memories. »He is lurking behind every corner« she said. In order to start over, K. felt the strong urge to get rid of things - or at least those which held the most painful reminders of her loss and loneliness. A.'s clothes were sorted out (I got a few beautiful items, like a wool coat, a belt and some cashmere turtlenecks). The wedding photo was taped over with a postcard, the boxes with our family photos were thrown away without any communication beforehand. It barely helped. The interior and the building itself weighed too heavy. Similar to the time after the disruptions in 1990, when they had just met, fallen

in love and decided to renovate A.'s parents' house together and replace all the GDR furniture with West furniture, K. now wants to sell and give away everything, sell the house and rent a two-room apartment, furnished from scratch. Tabula rasa.

Yesterday I came home to visit K. She is currently in a psychiatric hospital in the area of my hometown. On my walk from the station to the house I meet S., who is a few years older than me. He is on his way to Rewe or Netto on his skateboard because, as he says, he is craving something sweet. We have a bit of forced small talk, mostly about how weed is legal now and how the police in Saxony-Anhalt will be going crazy checking whether people are stoned in the car or have some THC in their system. »I'm just not going to drive the car until the cops calm down« he says. When I arrive at the house I walk around for maybe an hour and look at everything. Indeed - it is so silent here. I am not really sad that I won't come here that often anymore. I don't feel the presence of A. tremendously strongly.

The rather functional rooms strike me most - the boiler room, the basement, the shed by the pool. It feels like here I can follow the traces of K.'s doing. Big yogurt cups are being kept, because they are practical vessels. One of them is emblazoned with a strawberry whose color has turned green over time. Old bedsheets and baby clothes are being stored in transparent plastic bags. I am touched by the cupboard with photos of the house and the dogs stuck on it, and I start to remember scenes. Close to that there is this wobbly hanging cupboard, in which our sweets were kept with a lock for a period when we were kids. There was a VHS tape with a scene of A. opening that lock with a giant bolt cutter (I guess the key got lost) and us around him screaming which sweets we wanted. K. must have been behind the camera.

I meet her around 3PM. She proudly tells me that she is finally able to read books again - something she wasn't capable of doing for the last two years. She has already read 5 books since she came to the clinic 3 weeks ago. It is the first real day of spring. Grass and leaves look an almost unreal shade of green through the strong sunlight. K. is quite silent and mostly looks straight down than around at the landscape. She said she was nervous to see me. Walking helps and we both become a little more relaxed and connected. We talk about her annual holidays at the Baltic Sea when she was small, about her new beginning with a fresh apartment and also about how I have to find a way to sustain myself somehow. We stop off at a café where she takes a cherry sundae and I take an Iced coffee with a scoop of vanilla. Her pink T-shirt says »Give me a smile« and I ask if I can take a photo of her. She smiles.