

Anders herum wäre schlimmer

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The Other Way Around Would Be Worse

André M. Bajorat

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Prologue - Chicago

My right leg won't do what I tell it.

Monday morning, hotel room in Chicago, sun on Lake Michigan. I'm trying to stand up. My brain sends the signal. My leg doesn't care. It's not a cramp, not a pulled muscle - it's more like someone cut a wire. Somewhere between my head and my right foot, the connection is gone.

The fear comes fast. Up from my gut, into my chest. For a second it nearly takes over. But I've got this switch - I've used it before - where fear gets to exist but doesn't get to drive. I breathe. I look at my leg. And I think: Right. This is what's happening. What do I do next?

Lotta is sitting across from me. She's 16. We got to Chicago yesterday, and this was supposed to be a big adventure - two weeks in the USA, father and daughter, making up for the trip that fell through last year when my heart stopped in the Harz Mountains. Instead she looks at me with a calm that makes me proud and sad at the same time and says: "Dad, we're going to the hospital."

5:30 a.m. at the ER. Lotta's idea - no queue at that hour. She's right. I hand over my credit card - welcome to American healthcare - and what follows is an 18-hour marathon of tests, conversations, and guesswork. Lots of maybe, no answers. That evening they want to admit me. I say no and discharge myself.

Not because I'm stubborn. Not because I'm brave. Because I look at my 16-year-old daughter and know: she's not sleeping in a hospital chair. And I'm not leaving her alone in a hotel in a city she doesn't know. So we need a solution. Solutions – that's something I'm good at. Always have been.

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Back at the hotel I borrow a wheelchair. My right leg is just hanging there, a thing attached to my hip that doesn't belong to me anymore. We call people. My wife Nette in Hamburg. The ADAC – Germany's roadside assistance and travel insurance. A school friend of Lotta's who lives somewhere in the States.

Next morning, things aren't better. They're worse. The numbness is creeping from my right leg across my middle into my left. You can't stop it with willpower. All I can do is watch. I try telling myself it's the injection from the orthopaedist, a side effect, something that'll pass. But part of me already knows that's not true.

Lotta's friend picks her up late morning. Nette gets on a plane.

But first, Lotta and I have breakfast. Lake Michigan through the window, morning sun, beautiful hotel in the middle of Chicago. Then we take a little trip in the wheelchair – it's the only thing I can show my daughter of this city. A few blocks, a few impressions. I try to stay in the moment, not think about what's coming. Just be here, with her, in the sun. Then her friend pulls up, Lotta gets in the car, and I take a taxi back to the hospital.

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They admit me fast. The numbness keeps spreading. I can feel it moving past my navel into my left leg. My right leg still has this weird hypersensitivity - every touch hurts - but I can't move it.

That day I have a controlled bowel movement for the last time. I don't know it's the last time. You never do.

Tuesday night I try to get to the bathroom. When I stand up, I fall - my left leg is giving out too, can't hold my weight anymore. Hitting the cold hospital floor makes it real in a way nothing else has. I'm lying there staring at the ceiling thinking: This is happening. You're not going to sleep this off. This is your body now.

Wednesday, July 9, 2025. I can't get up anymore.

That same day Nette lands in Chicago. Lotta comes back. We're three again, in a hospital room 7,000 kilometres from home. When Nette walks through the door, I'm not thinking about my legs or the diagnosis or the ADAC. I'm thinking: Now we've got this. Together we've got this. The way we've had everything together since eleventh grade in Remscheid. That feeling - the three of us, no longer each on our own - is stronger than the fear.

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What comes next are the hardest days of my life. And I say that as someone who was dead on a campsite in the Harz fourteen months earlier. For fifteen minutes.

But the cardiac arrest was an off and on. Gone, then back. No process, no watching, no slow fade. Chicago is different. In Chicago I watch my body leave. Day by day, a bit more. And the worst part isn't the pain or the helplessness - it's the

watching. Being fully awake, thinking clearly, and not being able to do a damn thing about it.

Thursday I lose bladder control. Back pain is brutal. Friday, July 11, the last control below my navel goes. For the first time I have the sensation that stays with me to this day: like I've got the legs, feet, and backside of an elephant sitting on a small hard rubber ball – and the ball is on a sailboat in rough seas.

Day after that, I lose bowel control too.

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There are two nights in Chicago I call black.

I've got a system for sorting my nights. Blue: good sleep, positive thoughts, first coffee in the morning blows it all away. Grey: light shadow, not much sleep, thoughts going in circles, but manageable. Black: sleep doesn't come and despair does. Pain I can't locate. Limitations that grow every day. The feeling of being trapped in this city, not even allowed to leave the hospital.

In one of these black nights I think – for the first and only time – about whether there's a point in going on. Not abstract, not philosophical. Concrete: Do I want to live like this? Can I ask Nette to end it if things get worse?

Next morning I talk to her about it. Straight, the way we've talked for thirty-plus years. We agree: if it gets worse, we stop. That conversation – as heavy as it sounds – gives me peace. The weight lifts because the decision isn't hanging in the air anymore. It's been said.

And then morning comes, and with the morning the light, and I choose – like I've almost always chosen – what's ahead, not what's behind.

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They move me to intensive care. Suspected spinal cord infarction. Lumbar puncture, spinal fluid, a haematoma. I'm only allowed to lie on my back, which makes the pain worse.

They start autoimmune therapy with high-dose cortisone. The first hit is unreal – my pain drops from a 9 to a 1 in minutes. Warm wave through my whole body. For a second I think: Maybe this fixes it. Maybe I wake up tomorrow and wiggle my toes. I hold that thought even though another part of me knows hope and reality don't always play well together.

One night my heart joins the party – arrhythmias from the changed meds and a contrast agent. Twelve people flood my room. For the doctors here, my heart is a new problem. For me, it's an old one. I've got a defibrillator in my chest. As far as hearts go, I'm actually the most relaxed person in the room.

While the doctors work on me, friends back in Germany are trying to get me home. The ADAC – to whom we've been paying dues for decades like good citizens – says no. Claims my problems were known in Germany before the flight. That the orthopaedist warned me. That's a lie. But the yellow angels take the easy way out. Private medical transport: 165,000 euros.

That evening it gets to be too much for Lotta. While we're playing UNO, trying to distract ourselves, she has to say out loud how unfair it all is. She's right. It is unfair. Her dad is in

a hospital in Chicago, can't move his legs, heart's acting up, the ADAC says no, and the big father-daughter trip turned into an ER and card games.

I look at her and say: "Lotta, the other way around would be worse." Meaning: better me in a wheelchair with a clear head than the reverse. Better to lose the legs than to lose my mind. Better to be here and fight than not be here at all. She looks at me and says nothing. But I think she gets it.

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After almost two weeks, I'm done waiting. For the ADAC that won't move. For the insurance that's reviewing. For a diagnosis that never comes. I've rarely in my life waited for other people to fix my problems. Not starting now.

I book flights to Hamburg. Just like that, the way I always do – decide, act, don't look back. A neurologist at the UKE, Hamburg's university hospital, has agreed to take me. I've got a permanent catheter because I can't feel my bladder and can't get to the aircraft toilet. Whether I'll be able to lie down on the plane isn't totally clear when I book. I'll take the risk. I want to go home.

The morning before the flight I touch my legs for the first time in nearly two weeks. Without flinching. I run my hand down my shin and it's bizarre – my hand feels the leg, but the leg doesn't feel my hand. Like a leg that fell asleep and won't wake up. Except maybe it will. I don't know. In that moment I feel both things at once: grief for what's gone and curiosity about what's coming. Equal strength. And I pick curiosity.

I see Chicago for the last time through a medical transport window. Two weeks in this city and all I've seen is a hotel, a

hospital, and the road between them. On the way to the airport I call friends and Nette's parents. I try to sound like I've got it all together. Maybe I even do.

On the plane I'm asleep the second we're airborne. Don't wake up till Frankfurt.

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Fourteen months before this, I was a man who bought a Pinarello Dogma – a dream racing bike, a statement in favour of the fast life. I rode it through the countryside around Hamburg, listened to the fine sounds of the mechanics, felt alive. 100 km/h on the Nürburgring, cycling tours in the Alps, 500-kilometre trips with mates. I was legs. My whole life, I was legs.

To understand how that man ended up in a medical transport through Chicago, unable to feel his own legs, I need to go back fifteen months. To a campsite in the Harz Mountains, a warm Saturday evening in May. Rainer, Detlef, and I sit in a semicircle, watching football on a phone, sharing pictures of the day.

It's the last thing I remember before I die.

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Part 1 – The Fast Life

Chapter 1 – The Dogma

May 2024

Fifteen minutes. That's how long it took to order my dream bike.

Wednesday in April 2024. I'm coming from lunch with mates from the Techbikers community, walking through Hamburg, and I pass a bike shop. In the window: a Pinarello Dogma. Black, lean, perfect. Since Jan Ullrich won the Tour de France in the nineties, this brand had been a dream – one I'd never pulled the trigger on because after a heart condition diagnosed in 2019, an electric racing bike seemed the sensible option for five years.

But I'm standing in front of this thing thinking: How much longer are you going to be sensible? You've got a heart condition, yes. But you're alive. You ride. You want to go fast. Either you choose the life you want right now or you spend the rest of it on an e-bike telling yourself it was the smart call.

I walk in, sit on it, fifteen minutes later it's ordered.

This bike is a statement in favour of the fast life.

End of April I pick it up – gorgeous spring Saturday. Cycling shorts, jersey, thin gilet. In my small rucksack: pedals, shoes, water bottle, bike computer. Morning train to Hamburg, final fitting, first loop, then home via Wedel.

What a feeling, sitting on this bike. Feeling the mechanics gently, hearing them very quietly. Gears, chain, crank – that precision, that lightness. Somewhere between Wedel and Pinneberg I have a moment where I think: This is what it's for. This is why it's worth being here. Not the job, not the bank account, not the next meeting. This feeling, this bike, this afternoon.

I love road cycling for the monotony, the meditation. And I love the machine underneath me. I can still list every racing bike I've ever owned and remember rides on each one.

The first was a black Peugeot, 12 gears. I was about 14. In my already pretty messed-up family in Remscheid, I'd decided against confirmation – couldn't picture a celebration like that in my environment – which meant no gift money either. But my empathetic uncle was smart enough to buy my Märklin model railway around that time, the one my dad had built in the attic in happier years. For almost exactly the price of the Peugeot: 680 Deutschmarks.

That's when the addiction started. And it hasn't let go. From the Peugeot through several Pearls and a Fagin to here, to the Dogma. From a kid in Remscheid who didn't have much to a man in Pinneberg who has more than he ever could have imagined. Sometimes on the bike I think about that kid. He couldn't have pictured where he'd end up. But he'd have understood why the bike matters. Because it means freedom. That was true at 14 and it's no different at 52.

My excitement about the new arrival isn't fully shared at home. For the rest of the family the Dogma is mainly another bike taking up space in the garage next to my other bikes.

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To understand why the Dogma is more than a bicycle, you need to know how I live. Or: how I live in the spring of 2024.

Fast. Full. Intense.

My name is André. I'm 52, live with my wife Nette and our nearly grown-up daughters Lilith and Lotta in Pinneberg, near Hamburg. We've been together since eleventh grade in Remscheid – moved to Cologne for university, which I never finished. I'm a dropout who happened to be in the right place at the right time a few times and turned it into something

other people call a career. I've never called it that. I always expected it to end because I was missing the formal credentials. But that ending never came.

In 2011 I started a fintech blog with friends - at a time when nobody outside the industry knew the word. It became paymentandbanking.com, a platform with a podcast and stage appearances, and at some point I became something like a first face of the German fintech wave. National news, business press. A gentle fame I enjoy but have never defined myself by. My day job is at a large German asset manager.

What drives me isn't career, money, or power. It's satisfaction, independence, freedom. And moments - with people I care about, in places that move me. There are a lot of those in my life: family, concerts, cycling tours, sailing, carnival in Cologne, beach days in Sankt Peter-Ording. My calendar is full, my energy high, my hunger for experiences bottomless. I like being around people, I seek connection, and I've somehow managed to build different groups of friends around me who give me strength and trust.

The trust part isn't a given. As a kid I never had a place like that - not in a home shaped by divorce and too much alcohol, not among friends who found me too grown-up for my age. That I've learned to bring people together and create safe spaces is probably compensation for something I lacked as a child. And today one of my biggest strengths. Honestly, it's the thing I'm most proud of. Not the blog, not the stage, not the job. That there are people who like being around me.

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The weeks after buying the Dogma are classic me: packed. Nette's dental practice anniversary, the OMR conference in

Hamburg - days of sundowners, fintech dinners, and conversations with people who share my curiosity. Evenings with my friend Miriam, my good friend Jan. Everything fast, everything at once, everything fun.

Bottom line: I barely get to ride the Dogma because life keeps getting in the way. And though I think about it - I won't take it to the Harz.

Because right after OMR, Nette, our dog Konrad, and I are driving our campervan to the Harz Mountains. Hiking with old friends - Kerstin, Detlef, Rainer, Tina. Six people who've known each other since the eighties and decided last year to make hiking weekends a tradition.

Tina and Kerstin I know from school - Kerstin was actually one of my first proper girlfriends. We met their partners over the years in Cologne, and Rainer in particular has become a close friend through sailing, carnival, and family holidays. In Braunlage we've booked a spot for the van and a tent at a small campsite. Plan is a few peaks including the Brocken, and Rainer and I want to scout mountain bike trails for a later trip with the sailing crew.

I'm looking forward to the full days ahead. The hiking, the evenings in the van, card games, conversations. Sitting with Rainer and Detlef on Saturday evening, watching football on a phone, sharing pictures of the day.

What I don't know: it'll be the last thing I do before my heart stops.

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Chapter 2 - The Harz

May 2024 - From 100 to Zero

Never been to the Harz before. I'm surprised how beautiful it is. Small campsite in Braunlage, friendly Dutch owner, spot for the van and a tent. Nette and I arrive a bit ahead of the others. The four join later, we walk into Braunlage for food, first evening talking and playing games in the van.

Friday we climb the Brocken – bleak, not great. Saturday we go for the Wurmberg instead. Busy at the top. At lunch we end up next to a huge, loud, happy family celebration. As a small-family kid, that hits me. What would it have been like, growing up with cousins, uncles, aunts, a long table, laughter from every direction? I'll never know. But I can make sure my kids know tables like that – even if ours are made of friends more than relatives.

Descent along some mountain bike trails. I send intimidating photos to the sailing crew on WhatsApp and get nervous replies. With Detlef I follow the Bundesliga relegation drama on the phone.

Back at the campsite we watch the highlights over a beer. Rainer, Detlef, and I in a semicircle. Football on a phone, sharing pictures. Kerstin's in the shower, Tina's getting ready, Nette's feeding Konrad. One of those moments where everything's right – mood, people, place. One of those moments where I think: This is how it should be. This is what a good day feels like.

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Next thing I remember: a lot of agitated voices.

Voices that all seem to be about me. I can talk. Apparently that's good news, because when I tell everyone to calm down and say I really need to pee, it's met with relief and the words "Just let it go."

Between the beer and the voices: a gap of fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes during which I was dead. I don't get that in the moment. I especially don't get why everyone's so wound up when I feel like I just nodded off. Something happened, clearly, but my brain hasn't filed it yet. My brain is mainly filing the urgent need to pee.

My gentle attempts to get up on my own are firmly stopped. I'm wearing a cut-up T-shirt and a torn jacket. Minutes later I'm in an ambulance, then a helicopter – still not having let it go. The short ambulance ride on the winding campsite road makes me nauseous and I've got a vague fear because I can't read the situation. The only reason I know we're at the campsite is I catch a glimpse of the van during the transfer. That brief image calms me – something familiar in a situation where nothing is. What doesn't help: there are only strangers around me now and my people got left behind. Too many voices, too many faces wanting things from me, and I can't place any of them.

The emergency doctor in the helicopter explains in short sentences what happened.

Nette, Detlef, Rainer, and Tina kept me alive with CPR. Paramedics who arrived after eight minutes brought me back with seven defibrillator shocks over more than fifteen minutes. I'm heading for the hospital in Nordhausen, about fifteen minutes.

I don't argue. And I still don't let it go.

During the short flight I'm ventilated. My main fear: that my memories are gone or blurred, that I've taken cognitive damage from fifteen minutes without my own heartbeat. I test myself, lying in this helicopter. Wife's name? Nette. Daughters? Lilith and Lotta. Where do I live? Pinneberg. Last week? OMR. What's in the garage? The Dogma. All there. The memories come back minute by minute and I can think: those four did an incredible job. They didn't just keep my heart and lungs going – they kept my brain supplied with oxygen the whole time.

Four friends. Two of them Nette and I know from school, the other two came through their wives. Four people who on a Saturday evening at a campsite did the right thing. No hesitation, no training, no idea if it would be enough. My gratitude is too big for words – even though Detlef broke at least one of my ribs in the process. But as we now know: the only wrong thing in those moments is doing nothing, or doing it too gently.

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Nordhausen is genuinely good. Run almost entirely by doctors from distant countries – a striking contrast to the European election posters out front.

The team looks after me well. Cool heads, clear about what they can and can't do on site. They recommend getting a defibrillator implanted as soon as possible in Hamburg. Plus they give me a life vest – a wearable defi – to cover me until then.

Sunday – Rainer's birthday – he drives Nette home in the van while I stay in Nordhausen. But by Sunday morning I'm stable enough to walk on my own from ICU to my room. To

me everything feels the same as yesterday. I'd have loved to get on my Dogma and enjoy the northern Harz. Sometimes a broken arm is easier to understand than your own complicated heart. I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and look the same. Bit tired maybe. But there's no mark, no stamp, nothing that says: this man was dead yesterday. The body just carries on like nothing happened. And my head decides to do the same.

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Calls with our daughters. Tearful but composed. Both relieved to see me on FaceTime looking unchanged.

With Lotta, whom I'm supposed to pick up in Chicago in a few weeks, I decide: I won't lie to you, but I won't give you all the details until you're home. We can agree on that. Lilith has been warned by Nette and Rainer, which helps. Both take it bravely. I notice I instinctively switch to a mode I know: providing stability. Not for myself – for them. It calms me when I can calm others. Maybe that's how I deal with things – not thinking about me, but being there for others. Whether that's healthy, I don't know. But it's what I can do.

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I processed Braunlage fast. Maybe faster than the other five and my kids.

For me it felt like being switched off and on. And now I'm on again. Apart from the broken ribs, I feel fine. I can do pretty much everything once I'm off the continuous ECG.

This naivety about the whole thing – the constant forward look, the trust in myself, in my people, in the doctors –

probably protects me from dark thoughts, fear, and frustration.

I don't think about death. Because I'm alive. Sure, I was close – but I came back. So I don't think about it. When I do, it's more along the lines of: I've got a great life and I'd feel sorry for the people around me. But imagining it further – I can't be bothered. I'd rather focus on the living moments ahead. Sometimes I wonder if that's strength or denial. And then I think: Don't care. It works. As long as it works, I'm not going to question it.

I know you can only partly control how your mind works. But I try, by looking toward what's beautiful and alive and seeking moments and experiences. Because the only alternative is standing still. And that's something I've never been able to do.

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Chapter 3 – Sun and Sand

May–June 2024 – Processing Among Friends

Tuesday, Nette and Sönke set off in our van to Nordhausen to get me. Sönke is a close friend – we spend a lot of time watching football, doing sport, just hanging out. He's also our neighbour and family doctor, and he insists on picking me up himself. I wait outside the hospital, take one last look at the helicopter pad, enjoy my first steps in over 30 degrees. Before that I ordered from McDonald's one final time – the last time to this day, though I don't know that yet. Standing in the sun I think: Four days ago I landed here. And now I'm standing here, on my own legs, waiting to be picked up like it's a

normal hospital stay. Like nothing happened.

On the drive back Sönke asks if I was aware of anything during the rescue. I do recall a brief moment of breathlessness – whether at the start or during CPR, I can't say. Nette confirms there was a moment where I seemed briefly present. Beyond that I felt nothing until I came back. Strange to talk about it – like discussing a film you were in but slept through the key scene.

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The days before my first surgery at the UKE I spend in gorgeous summer weather in the garden, the hammock, the terrace with Konrad, sometimes Nette or Lilith. I read books and a bunch of photo books about road cycling in the Alps and Pyrenees that thoughtful friends bring by. I have to cancel the mountain bike trip with the sailing crew and our OBFF – Old but Fucking Fast – trip to the Pyrenees. The new Dogma hasn't been a great omen so far.

But these garden days are also good. I notice something that was hard for me before: doing nothing. Just sitting, Konrad next to me, sun on my face, no impulse to jump up, get something done, drive somewhere. Whether this is the start of a change or just post-Harz exhaustion, I don't know. But it doesn't feel bad.

Alongside the reading, I make a lot of phone calls. I'd rather tell the story myself than have weird rumours going round. In one call, Tina suggests I send a sign of life to the campsite owner and the Braunlage emergency services. Great idea. Both are surprised and pleased – the emergency crew rarely gets feedback on how people do after their work.

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The weekend before surgery was originally booked for the Harz mountain bike tour. Can't happen now. But thanks to the life vest I feel safe enough to turn it into two days at the beach in Sankt Peter-Ording and suggest it to the guys.

Everyone's in. Rainer has taken the train from Cologne and drives the van since I'm not allowed to drive for several weeks. Add Lars, my old friend and neighbour, Arne the boat owner, Captain Matze, and the dashing Sven – been sailing together for more than 15 years. After shopping together we spend two beautiful days at the beach. Games, barbecue, coffee, just good times.

Good to see how this group has grown closer over the years. Six men who've got along this well for more than 15 years, sharing life – the death of parents, Lars's unexpected stroke the year before, now me. These hits only bring us closer. After the hospital in Nordhausen, they were the first I told something had happened.

For me, these beach days before the hospital were the perfect setting to distract and to talk openly. With these guys I don't have to be strong. I can just say how it is, and it's not judged or dramatised. It's heard. That's rare. And it's worth a lot.

SPO has long been a magical place for me. Nette and I go there as often as we can. We wanted to get married there on the beach in 2006, couldn't find a caterer, had a beach party in Hamburg instead. But SPO stayed our place. I love the beach atmosphere, especially those magical evenings. I can completely switch off there – and will do so many more times in the months to come.

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Sunday evening before surgery we eat as a family with Juliane and hers – our weekly ritual. Monday morning I arrive at UKE.

Nobody seems to be expecting me. First there's no room, then I get to share with an ablation patient instead of a single. Plan is: defibrillator and ablation. Defi as backup, ablation to address the causes by cauterising scar tissue that might trigger arrhythmias.

For unclear reasons the surgery gets pushed day after day, so I meet four different roommates and spend lots of time with family and friends in the sun in the park across from UKE. Thursday an arrogant junior doctor gives the briefing – that same evening the plan changes: defibrillator only, no ablation. The arrhythmias were supposedly a one-off. A nice wish that unfortunately won't come true.

I'm a patient who trusts. I don't question every step. I accept the experts' call as given. Whether that's wise or naive, I don't ask myself right now. I trust people I place my trust in and let them do their thing. This trust has served me well in life. Here it'll lead to a second surgery that could've been avoided. But I don't know that yet.

Friday morning, surgery. What I didn't realise: the procedure is done while you're fully conscious. The anaesthetist is empathetic and asks what I do for a living. Turns out he has trouble with his own savings strategy. So we've got a topic for the next hour.

Surgery while you're awake is a strange experience. You follow the doctors' conversations, feel and smell what's happening behind the green curtain. It smells like

disinfectant and something I can't name – probably better that way. Thanks to the anaesthetist's distraction I cope well and can even test the implanted functions together with the doctors. Surreal: I'm on an operating table, they're working on my heart, and I'm explaining why an index fund savings plan is a good idea.

Saturday I'm discharged. Next day we celebrate Nette's birthday – morning with family, evening with friends. A day full of people, just how I like it.

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Chapter 4 – The Psychologist

June 2024 – 45 Minutes That Change Everything

Saturday morning I head to Sylt. Alongside the official rehab still to come, I've been looking into private places. A fintech colleague tipped me off: Lanserhof. The website and prices made me hesitate. I usually avoid elite places like that. But a few more recommendations and the desire for genuinely individual care convinced me to spend eight days there. It's one of those decisions: if not now, when? My heart stopped three weeks ago. This is not the moment to be cheap.

I dare to come by bike after the surgery. Not the whole way from Pinneberg, but as a pack horse to the train and then the final stretch from Westerland station. Without my own bike I'd be reluctant to stay on an island that's practically made for cycling.

Early afternoon in Westerland, met by a driver. I ask him to put my bag in the boot. He stares at me as I get on the bike and points at the clouds. It does rain more than expected, but

the fresh wind and good air feel great after weeks without riding. One thing about Sylt: the path through the dunes from Westerland towards List is a dream.

At the Lanserhof I park my wet bike in the garage and get a warm welcome. The staff member tells me I'm the first guest ever to arrive by bicycle. A glance at the cars in the garage makes me grin. Porsche, Mercedes, Range Rover – and my dripping bike. I'm in the right place.

One thing becomes clear fast: you don't book the Lanserhof to get full. The goal is inner cleansing and sharpening your awareness. So we all make peace with the lovingly prepared whispers of nothing and end the evenings with lukewarm herbal teas by the fireplace.

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Monday, after the all-clear from the chief physician, I get going. I've deliberately decided to have my mind checked too, and I've got an afternoon appointment with a psychologist.

I go in without expectations. I sleep fine, no panic attacks, I feel stable. What can she possibly tell me that I don't already know?

I leave those 45 minutes with a clear shift. I'd call them the most valuable of the entire stay. With more than a year of distance I can say: that session changed my daily life, my handling of stress, and basically my thinking and behaviour for good.

She makes clear that I don't have anxiety or sleep issues, but a real problem with my autonomic nervous system. I live almost exclusively in sympathetic mode – fight or flight. My parasympathetic system, the one responsible for rest and

recovery, has atrophied and is sulking in a corner somewhere. The result: my brain, my body, and my organs don't get the rest they need. My version of "active" relaxation – running, cycling – is miles from real rest. That my body eventually screamed stop doesn't surprise her.

As she talks I feel something inside give way. Not collapse – give way. Like a muscle finally relaxing after you've been tensing it for hours without knowing. What she's describing is my entire life. The always-on. The inability to switch off. The feeling that standing still is falling behind. And for the first time I think: Maybe that's not drive. Maybe that's a problem.

After the conversation, on the way to my room, I open an app on my phone that my friend Jan recommended years ago and that I tried exactly once: Headspace.

In the room I lie on the bed and disappear into my first session. No headphones – I wore them constantly until my collapse but can barely stand them now. The sounds come too close, I need more distance. Ten minutes. Doing nothing but breathe and listen to a voice saying let your thoughts pass. Ten minutes where my mind is truly still for the first time in weeks – maybe years. Not empty, but still. A difference I didn't know before.

Since that afternoon in June 2024 I've used Headspace at least five times a week. The meditation techniques have helped in so many moments: falling asleep, stress, staying calm, medical procedures. Stupid of me that it took more than 52 years, or at least six years after Jan's recommendation.

I just wasn't ready.

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Another thing that'll become part of my routines: yoga. At the Lanserhof I can't start yet because of the surgery – arm not allowed above shoulder height. But I've made the decision.

And then there's something else I take from the Lanserhof that'll prove crucial: strengthening my muscles above the legs.

Until June 2024 I was basically just legs. My whole sporting life I'd only trained my legs – on the bike, running. Upper body, core, arms – never consciously worked on them. The Lanserhof team changes that and makes the point quickly and simply. Since then I look at resistance bands, dumbbells, and balance boards differently and don't smirk at anyone who talks about strength training.

I've managed to build it into my routine – about five times a week, simple exercises I learned there. You need very little gear and space. Any pair of cycling shorts costs more.

After eight days I leave the Lanserhof, following a run in the rain with one of the physios. Bike again. I'm happy, cleansed, a few kilos lighter, decent skin tone, and above all: new rituals in my luggage.

Meditation. Yoga. Upper body training. Three things I didn't know or dismissed before. Three things that'll define my daily life from now on. And three things whose importance I can't yet imagine.

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Chapter 5 – The Defibrillator Speaks Up

July 2024 – 3:12 a.m.

The weeks after the Lanserhof are good. I often cook lunch for the family, spend a lot of time at home, and use a day to refresh my first aid skills – last time was more than 30 years ago for my driving licence. What Nette and the others did in the Harz was motivation enough. Courses like that are a formality for most people, but the mood shifts after everyone shares their motivation and I tell my little story. Just do it regularly – it helps.

Right after the Lanserhof I ride out to meet the Techbikers arriving in Hamburg. Had to cancel my own ride because of the Harz, but I know the route and hide in a side street just before they pass. Reunion at full speed is brilliant – riding the last 15 kilometres to city hall together, being part of that feeling again. In moments like these I think: This. This is why it's worth being here. From the combination of sport, people, and a good cause, I draw strength and motivation.

Then packed days: Berlin for the European Championship with my friend Arnulf, who isn't even into football but whom I need to hold after the Harz. Remscheid for a property owners' meeting about my parents' house. And Cologne – first reunion with my lifesavers since the Harz. The evening at Rainer and Tina's is special. A bit melancholic, but mostly cheerful, forward-looking. Some groups you don't have to be anything in and can say everything. This is one.

Home, I see my women briefly and go straight to bed.

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3:12 a.m. I'm woken in an unpleasant way.

Never experienced it before, but I know right away: my little friend fired. I recognise the feeling from those moments

when you're too lazy to flip the fuse while renovating, try to connect the lamp, and the electricity says hello.

Lying in the dark, the first thing I think isn't fear. It's: OK, that's what it's there for. It did its job. Strange moment – my heart just did something it shouldn't, and a machine in my chest corrected it. And here I am with a calm pulse and a clear head.

I hesitate to wake Nette, then do. We discuss whether the hospital now would actually help, and decide we'd rather roll over and I'll see my cardiologist in the morning. She asks if I'm sure. I'm sure. Don't know where the certainty comes from, but I'm sure.

The plan works. I cycle to her office.

My cardiologist is a special person – but even she's a bit surprised at how relaxed I sit in front of her. Friendly, smiling, nowhere near panicked. The little helper in my chest is easy to read out: arrhythmias and the defi's response are documented. We part with the agreement that it's good the helper works, but we'd prefer not to see each other more often because of it.

Why I wasn't afraid that night, I don't know exactly. Maybe because I've decided this technology has exactly this purpose and will work. And generally it helps that I'm not afraid of the future. So far, my life has always got better going forward – why would that change? As a kid I didn't have much to lose, and later I could always rely on myself, Nette, and the people around us. I'm not afraid of change because change always holds an opportunity, and we've always grabbed them.

Being alone in the basement at night or alone in the house – that I find uncomfortable. But a defibrillator firing at 3 a.m.

- that I can breathe through.

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After my cardiologist I pack the last things for rehab in Bad Malente. On the train I think about the night and what might have triggered it. The last few days weren't exactly garden-sitting - Berlin, Remscheid, Cologne. Packed programme. Then again, I was living and doing what I love: seeing friends, having moments. I take the firing as a reminder to be more mindful and to build in breaks too. And I think of the Lanserhof psychologist and her sulking parasympathetic system. Maybe she's right and I need not just new rituals but fewer old patterns. Less fast, less full, less everything at once. A thought I don't say out loud yet. But it's there.

Malente - I'm shocked by the state of the town. Remarkable how run-down even "spa towns" near Hamburg can be. The clinic itself is modern, nice park, lake view from the front. I get a room at the back. Unlucky.

A doctor tells me after a few days: "You're a bit of an unusual specimen in our zoo." I make the best of it. Since the Lanserhof I've got meditation in my routine almost daily, and here I can finally - six weeks after the defi surgery - fully use my arm and start yoga. The beginnings are frustrating, and it doesn't help that the women in the yoga videos look like 23-year-old ballerinas. But I push through and quickly notice progress - not just effort but relaxation in the exercises. A new kind of satisfaction that comes not from performance but from its opposite: letting go.

Morning routine takes shape: twelve minutes meditation, 15 minutes strength and stability, then yoga. And where I

used to listen to podcasts or music non-stop on bike rides, since Sylt I enjoy the quiet in my head and the wind in my ears.

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Through an acquaintance I hear about a professor in Lübeck who helped a friend with arrhythmias. I review what happened at the UKE: the arrhythmias didn't stay a one-off, the backup had to step in pretty quickly. Time to address the root causes.

I send the professor a spontaneous email. He invites me at short notice. This hands-on approach appeals to me and matches how I deal with problems: analyse, tackle, solve. No agonising, no looking back.

After a good conversation we schedule an ablation for right after summer holidays. Plus the team enrolls me in home monitoring – any defi firing gets reported to the clinic every morning. As a tech person, that gives me another level of security.

Rehab winds down. What's perfect: Arne and Matze, two of the sailing friends, live nearby and visit several times during the three weeks – fisherman's hut by the lake, dinner in Scharbeutz, barbecue at Matze's. That they come by so often says everything about this group. I say a proper goodbye to my clinic tablemates. In my luggage: a morning routine that carries me through every day, a professor in Lübeck going after the root causes, and the growing feeling that from the Harz not just a crisis but something new is emerging.

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Chapter 6 – Atlantic and Loss of Control

August 2024 – The Valve

I've mentioned Juliane and her husband Christian. They and their three kids are our closest friends in Pinneberg. Beyond the shared dental practice Nette and Juliane run together, we're connected by a deep, long friendship.

After the Harz, they scrapped their own holiday and offered to spend summer together. Our plan had been the campervan, but I'm not allowed to drive yet and Nette doesn't want to do all the driving alone. The last-minute house for the nine of us in southern France has a pool, sits right on the Bassin d'Arcachon, and the beach is 100 metres away.

I develop a lovely morning routine. First one up – coffee on the terrace with Konrad, then yoga mat for meditation and exercises. After that, strength and stability training, then off to the sea with Konrad to pick up bread and croissants on the way back. By then the house is alive and we all have breakfast at a long table on the terrace. Hard to start a day better than that. And during these morning hours I often think: Maybe this is the new normal. Maybe life after the Harz can look like this – slower in the morning, full during the day, surrounded by people I love.

With Christian I do gorgeous bike rides around the Bassin and along the Atlantic. With the kids we watch an Olympic football match in Bordeaux.

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Then the good mood tips. My fault.

The trigger is nothing. We agree to meet at the Atlantic for swimming – I take the bike, Juliane and Christian the car. We end up at two different dune crossings, 500 metres apart. No phone signal on the beach. We can't see or reach each other.

Instead of enjoying the solitude, the sea, the perfect setting, I spiral into bad thoughts. I feel abandoned. Treated unfairly. I know, while it's happening, that it's irrational. I'm standing on one of the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen, sun shining, waves crashing, and all that's happened is a misunderstanding about a dune crossing. But my head turns it into something bigger. They left me here. I'm not important enough. Why do I always have to adapt? Thoughts I recognise as wrong while I'm thinking them – and still can't stop.

It escalates when I head back and the bike chain snaps in the first 20 metres. 25 kilometres from the house, middle of the woods. We've got signal again, Juliane tries calling – but in a mix of anger and frustration I don't want to talk to her. I set off on foot, stubborn, furious at myself and the world, determined to make this journey alone. Nette's attempts to reel me in by phone go nowhere too. The route is hilly so I can use the bike as a scooter on the downhills. Faster than expected. But the speed doesn't blow the pointless, unjust anger from my head. With every kilometre the defiance grows, and with the defiance the shame, and with the shame the defiance. A loop I can see right through but can't break.

On the main road a friendly French gardener picks me up and drives me home. I'm touched. A total stranger who, without a word, sees that someone needs help. He doesn't ask, doesn't judge, just stops. In that moment this gardener is the most empathetic person in my vicinity – and that says more about me than anyone else.

The others have gathered for dinner and ask me to join. I'm still so loaded with negative thoughts that I say no and sulk like a kid. Sitting alone in the house, knowing I'm wrong. Every second. But between knowing and acting there's a gap I can't bridge.

The following days are rough for everyone. We try to live normally, it's clear something's in the air, and it blows up in a loud argument a couple of days later. An ugly situation: Nette stuck in the middle, Julianne and especially Christian shouting at me, me trying to justify myself with pretty stupid arguments. We agree to put it behind us and bring the holiday to a decent end. Honestly, only half succeeds. I have some nice hours with Nette on the bike, an excursion to the Dune du Pilat, but overall the holiday ends in a minor key. My doing.

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I'd have thought I had better control. Especially considering what these people did for us – rearranged their holiday, booked a house for nine, just been there.

Best I can explain: I was overwhelmed. Too many people and expectations after weeks of solitude in rehab. I was looking for a valve. A valve I should have closed sooner and more carefully.

I know this behaviour from childhood. Getting into thought spirals with friends I could barely escape. In those moments I'd want to be alone, unreachable by any argument. Usually time was the only thing that helped.

Whether it's being an only child or never having learned anything like a culture of conflict – I don't know. What's clear:

from very early on I had to work through everything alone. In a home increasingly shaped by divorce and alcohol, there was nobody to talk things through with. You swallowed, went to your room, waited for it to pass. And apparently that's still what I do – at 52, by the Atlantic, 25 kilometres from the house with a snapped chain.

I'm glad Juliane, Christian, and Nette forgave me afterwards. Our relationship might even be closer for it. If so, this loss of control would at least have a good side.

And it shows me something I don't want to forget: Change isn't linear. I can discover my parasympathetic system at the Lanserhof, meditate every morning, have the most positive outlook – and still, in moments of overwhelm, fall back into patterns as old as I am.

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Chapter 7 – Without Fear

September 2024 to January 2025 – Concerts, Ablation, and the Question: Where Does the Courage Come From?

Still on sick leave, ablation scheduled for late September. But I don't feel ill and I use the time to process and to live.

At home my behaviour has changed. I create islands of calm – alongside the morning routine in the basement I often sit in the hallway or kitchen with a book. Wouldn't have done this before the Harz. Just sit and read, middle of the day, no guilt. Now I can. Small victory over the old André who always had to be moving.

But the hunger for experiences is still there. Days with Konrad in SPO, at the lake with Arnulf and his daughter, a weekend at the same lake with the sailing crew. We'd planned to sail, but I can't handle the vulnerability at sea yet. The feeling that arrhythmias could come any time doesn't bother me in daily life – on the water it does. Probably the fear of going under. Strange contradiction for someone who calls himself fearless. But fearlessness apparently isn't evenly distributed across all situations.

The guys give up their annual sailing trip for me. We spend a nice weekend at the lake instead, talking about what each of us wants to change. I seem to be taking the most consistent steps – the length of my absence from work alone shows that.

And I use every free minute on the Dogma. Happy to move this beautiful machine through the countryside around Hamburg, listening to its fine sounds. With the Hamburg Techbikers, the OBFF crew, Sönke – or alone. Alone is fine too.

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Concerts are pure joy of living for me. There are few moments when I feel as alive. I go to a lot this summer and autumn because I want to feel life, absorb it, enjoy being in the crowd with Nette and friends. That moment when the band plays the first bars and a jolt runs through the audience – in that moment I'm nowhere else. No thought of heart, defi, illness. Just music and people and the feeling of being in the right place.

With very old friends from primary school days in Remscheid I see The Levellers in Cologne – one of the bands of our youth. The audience has aged along with us and the

band, doesn't hurt the evening, just makes the mosh pit smaller and more civilised. In Munich I see Fat Freddy's Drop with my friend Bernd – a band with an incredible lightness that carries me through any day or boring presentation.

Music has been with me since childhood. As a kid I'd sit with a cassette recorder in front of the few music shows on the radio. First real stereo system bought with holiday job money – Kenwood, Onkyo, Pioneer, Yamaha components, a kind neighbour built the speakers. Old enough that vinyl and cassettes defined my musical life first. Fifteenth birthday: first CD, Dire Straits "Brothers in Arms." Every Deutschmark went into music, and in Remscheid there was a record shop where the owner – an old football mate of my dad's – would recommend and play records for me without hesitation.

Live music came early too. Through my very political mother – Easter marches, anti-nuclear protests in the eighties. That's where I found my love for live performance. BAP, Bots, Hannes Wader – my first heroes. That my mother opened this door to music is something I'm grateful for.

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Late summer I switch from the racing bike to e-mountain bikes in the Sauerland hills with my MTB gang. Six men who've grown close over the years – with Arnulf and Jan I talk on the phone almost daily during Konrad walks. Like the sailing crew, a group of true individuals who work incredibly well together.

I seem to have this thing where I bring different people together and create trust. A kind of safe place. Not consciously, but it gives me deep satisfaction and generates energy.

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Ablation at the Lübeck university hospital. Standard procedure, home after two days. Again I notice I'm not afraid before these things. I look forward to the better outcome and trust the doctors. Of course there can be complications – I listen carefully during the briefing. But for me the glass is always at least three-quarters full.

My fearlessness has been with me through life. I've thought a lot lately about whether it's a strength or a weakness. Concluded: strength. Whether at 100 km/h on the racing bike at the Nürburgring or a defibrillator without general anaesthesia – if I were truly afraid of these things, I couldn't live my life.

But where does it come from?

After my parents' divorce – I was 10 or 11 – things were volatile. Dad moved to another city, started a new family, and from then on was at most a distant uncle. Mum was 18 when I was born, now in her prime, wanted to catch up on life. Changing boyfriends, unemployment, drugs, alcohol, little money – mixed in with an open house and many fascinating people. Several times she took off for months to travel the world. I stayed with my loving grandmother and my eventually very ill grandfather. But grandparents aren't parents.

Somewhere in there I realised I'm responsible for my own life. That I can and must set my own path. At the same time there wasn't much to preserve or lose. Since then I've only looked forward. I was lucky to have an inner compass – and eventually Nette – that rarely led me into danger. Mum's example was probably always in the back of my mind, keeping

me from exploiting my freedom as a teenager. Though she did give me values: friendship, tolerance, openness.

So I learned to rely on myself. That the future was always better than the past. That change always held something good. That it helps to hold on to few things, so you're not afraid of losing them.

Looking back, maybe that's the greatest gift of a difficult childhood: learning early to live without a safety net. If you never had a net, you're not afraid of falling. You've learned to catch yourself. Or to find people who catch you.

One more thing: this broken family showed me I want to live differently. That friends, alongside Nette and the kids, are my safe harbour.

Short version: I'm not afraid of the future because so far it's always been better than my past, and I've got people around me who carry me into it.

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After the ablation, reintegration into work begins. I enjoy thinking along and contributing, but I feel even less desire to lead than before. Something's shifted. Not the interest in the topics – that's still there. But the ambition to lead people, carry responsibility for teams, compete – that's grown quieter. Like someone turned the dial back a notch without asking. I don't miss it.

Mid-December I meet our CEO Stefan in Frankfurt. We've got a trusting, almost friendly relationship and he's been at my side the whole time – emotionally, without pressure. Quick agreement: I won't go back to my old job but become a part-time member of his strategy team. Without the burden of

people management.

Huge piece of luck, having a boss like that at a moment like this. Tremendous peace knowing I've got that support without professional pressure.

December: another surgery. My cardiologists found the arrhythmias mainly happen at rest. So they put in a combo device - pacemaker plus defi - this time under general anaesthesia, in Lübeck. When I wake up there's a plastic bag with something on my legs. Turns out it's my old defibrillator - which I paid for - and I can take it home. It now hangs in a picture frame in our living room. Next to the art on the wall, a machine that saved my life. Somehow it fits.

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Chapter 8 - Northern Lights and Cologne

January-April 2025 - Life with Full Hands

No winter holiday planned after this special year, but the kids have time off. Triggered by Instagram and TikTok, Lilith and Lotta develop the wish to see the northern lights. Nette has no interest in the cold and would rather stay with Konrad. So I fly to Tromsø with the two of them.

Beautiful days in snow and ice: get stuck with the car and need a tow truck, snowmobile tour at minus 35 across a frozen lake, breathtaking northern lights several evenings. When you stand under a green, pulsing sky for the first time and feel your own daughters beside you, equally speechless - there's nothing to think. You're just there. And grateful.

For the three of us it's a lovely time. We talk a lot about life after Lilith's graduation. Lotta gives Lilith the idea of an au pair year – shortly after she finds a family with two kids in Milan.

Lilith turns 18 this month. On one hand it feels like yesterday I carried her in my arms. On the other we've experienced so much. What's especially meaningful: I have a good, trusting relationship with my kids. Makes me happy because I never had that and there was no template. My firm intention was never to be a father like mine, but a present, good partner at my children's side. I hope and believe I've managed that. Sometimes I look at them and think: This is the best thing I've done. Not the cleverest, not the most successful. But the best.

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Back to the Lanserhof. First time was so good I want another go – focus on sport and massages. The exercises from summer I've kept up, so we start at a different level. The physios teach me new stuff for upper body and core.

Again no contact with other guests. I handle quiet and solitude well and don't miss anything. My shy side, which people don't always believe. In unfamiliar settings I'll stand alone in a corner waiting for a miracle rather than make the first move. I very, very rarely approach first. More comfortable on a stage in front of 500 than alone at a hotel bar. Makes no sense. But that's who I am.

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Carnival. One of my favourite times of the year. Celebrating with people I love, singing and dancing in my heart's city,

Cologne, at Rainer and Tina's.

Carnival might be exactly right for my personality: as a rather reserved person I can hide behind a costume and be someone I wouldn't normally be. Costume choice for our group has been my job for years – usually group-compatible anti-heroes. Past few years: punks. Rainer thrives in this role.

Special carnival for me: I've been drinking virtually no alcohol for months and keep it that way during the festivities. Since Kölsch is basically part of carnival, I was curious: can I still have fun? Conclusion: I can. Plus a clarity in the evening and next morning that's new and welcome. I notice how much of what I thought was fun actually always came from the music, the people, the atmosphere – not the glass.

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After carnival, my professional return. At a paymentandbanking event in Berlin I'm back on stage several times. Feels great. Standing on stage, moderating, panel discussions – I've learned that since 2011. Before that: always afraid, always stage fright. Today a respect remains, but it's become a joy. A skill that contradicts the shy character – but I have to admit, it gives me confidence.

What's changed: I'm open about what happened in the Harz. Not just since Berlin – from day one. Right after the event I called friends and acquaintances myself. Rather from my mouth than through rumours. On stage and in conversations I do the same: my cardiac arrest isn't a secret, it's part of my story. I find the openness makes everything easier – for me and for the other person.

This openness isn't strategy. It's a need. I want to own my story, not be the subject of speculation. And I've realised that showing vulnerability rather than hiding it is part of my processing. Doesn't make me weaker. Makes me stronger.

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After Berlin, Nette and I fly to Ibiza. Good friends who escape winter on the island. Days of food, hikes, first spring sun. Nice that as the kids grow up, we get our own freedom back.

On Ibiza my uncle calls: my dad's in hospital, doesn't look good.

I decide not to visit, not to contact his family. My uncle keeps me posted. After our return, during a bike ride with friends, I get the call: he's died. Sure, I'm sad – but not so sad I stop riding. I keep cycling and think about him. Not the man he was at the end, but the father he could have been. The few good moments – the model railway in the attic. The many moments that never happened. Grief without pain. More grief over something that never took place.

In the days after I think about the funeral. Nette makes clear: the funeral without me is unthinkable. She's right.

My parents were super social during my childhood – always people over, weekend parties in the basement or on the terrace. After the divorce, gone. Dad's friends disappeared in a new city. Mum's shrank with age and alcohol. I remember leaving her 60th birthday in tears – what was left of the wild life in her twenties and thirties looked so sad. Same with my dad: his 60th in a soulless pub at lunchtime. Nothing I picture for myself in six years.

These birthdays, my parents' lives after the divorce - cautionary tales for me. No cooling relationship with my own kids, no crumbling circle of friends, no duty-based family. Go big or not at all. I want to live differently. And I do.

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Weeks after that belong to SPO. Nette, Konrad, and I there several times in beautiful spring weather. Wonderful calm, standing at the beach with just Konrad, using the van as a mobile beach chair.

Almost a year since the Harz. The new rituals are locked in. Meditation, yoga, upper body training - all fixed parts of my routine. I work part-time, no pressure, ride my racing bike, go to concerts, celebrate carnival without alcohol, stand on stages, surrounded by people I love. The fast life hasn't slowed down but it's changed. It's become more conscious.

From the outside it looks like I've got everything under control.

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Chapter 9 - Techbikers and a Twinge in My Back

May-June 2025 - The Last Fast Days

May and June are packed with trips and weekends with friends. So packed I can barely believe, looking back, how much life fits into a few weeks.

The most emotional weekend: Lüneburg Heath. We repeat the Harz hiking tour - same group, different place. Underneath, everyone's probably trying not to let the Harz

events dominate. Not hushed up, but more present in our heads than our conversations show. I notice it in small gestures, glances, moments of silence. What happened at that campsite in Braunlage isn't over for any of us. Maybe it never will be.

I owe my life to this group. I don't want to keep saying it, but it's deep inside me and every time I see one of them it's right there. A profoundly deep gratitude I've never felt toward anyone else, in any other moment. More than a year later, it's as strong as the day after.

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Sailing trip to Fehmarn with the crew – a regatta. First time on a boat since the cardiac arrest. I've talked a lot about being fearless, but here I've got an uneasy feeling. It's the vulnerability at sea. Until the start I'm still thinking about going ashore. What if the defi fires out here? What if my heart does something it shouldn't and I'm an hour from the harbour?

I push through. Takes about an hour to readjust, to trust my body again. I don't keep the fear to myself – I share it with the group and get understanding back. The next days on the water are easy. Wind, sun, water. Fun.

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After a year's break, finally back with the Techbikers. Copenhagen to Berlin this year. Can't wait.

My lower back's been giving me trouble for over a year, osteopathy has hit its limits, so shortly before I get a pain injection from an orthopaedist. Works well – I ride the tour

without problems.

Few events I look forward to like the Techbikers. First ride in 2013 was life-changing – the mix of my favourite hobby, a sporting route, old friends, new people, charity, and just a lot of fun. Every time I think it can't be topped. Then the next tour tops it. This year: a concert and barefoot dancing on the beach in Waren. I'm standing barefoot in the sand, music playing, people around me I've known for years and people I met days ago, and I think: This is my life. Exactly this. Not the heart, not the defi, not the fear on the water. This.

As always, the tour ends in sunshine under the Brandenburg Gate.

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Back in Hamburg, days string together. Fintech stage, familiar faces at the Chamber of Commerce summer party. Riding home I overtake a female cyclist in Eimsbüttel, recognise various clues she's a Techbiker, text her at the next light asking why she's letting herself be overtaken. Next few kilometres Rilana and I ride together through the Hamburg night. Techbikers friends are everywhere.

Next morning I prep Lotta's school-leaving celebration – formal ceremony, then afternoon with friends on our new terrace. She's done brilliantly. Her own confident way.

That morning I do one more ride on the Dogma, meet the Techbiker Andrea in Hamburg. That's when I feel a slight twinge in my back for the first time. I think nothing of it. My back's been playing up for a year, that's what the injection was for, and a morning ride in the sunshine isn't the moment to worry.

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Next days: preparations. Lotta and I are making up for last year's cancelled USA trip – starting in Chicago. Nette's planning a campervan tour through Denmark with her oldest friend and Konrad.

Climbing stairs and walking, I feel a slight impairment in my right leg. I put it down to the injection a few days ago. Don't worry about it. In hindsight I ask myself whether I could have known. Whether my body was telling me something I didn't want to hear. But in that moment my head's already in Chicago, with Lotta, the adventure. The body can wait.

I pack my suitcase for Chicago.

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Part 2 – The Discovery of Slowness

Chapter 10 – Chicago

July 2025 – The Body Disappears

Did the fifteen months since the Harz change me?

I've become more approachable for people close to me and more distant from people I don't care for. Softer overall. I filter hard – by topic and by people – and mainly do things I find worthwhile, with people I like. I think I've got more patience, I'm a better listener. I'm grateful for every day because I was given another life and I'm not handing it back easily. I know better than ever what does me good. And especially what I don't want.

The unconditional focus on family and friends helps enormously. Being open – including with psychologists – has changed me. I rule fewer things out. And I look forward, consistently.

All of it I'll need in the coming weeks. Every last bit.

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Sunday morning, Lotta and I fly Hamburg via Munich to Chicago. Already in Munich I feel growing trouble in my right leg. We fly on. On the way I notice the leg losing strength, developing a weird hypersensitivity. Through Chicago airport I can only walk with Lotta's help. We leave the rental car and take a taxi. Walking through arrivals I think: It'll be better tomorrow. It's the injection. It's the long flight. Tomorrow everything's normal. Last day I can believe that.

What happens over the next two weeks, I told at the start of this book. The ER, the nights in blue, grey, and black, my body slowly disappearing below the navel. But there are things that didn't fit in the prologue.

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The morning I go to the hospital for the second time. Alone, in a taxi, in a city I don't know. Lotta's on her way to her friend, Nette's in a plane over the Atlantic. In this moment I'm as alone as I haven't been since childhood. And yet I'm not panicking. I function. Register, hand over credit card, wait. Somewhere in me there's an autopilot I've built up over 52 years. The kid from Remscheid who learned to manage alone because there was nobody else – he's back in this taxi in Chicago. Like he'd just been waiting.

The relief when Nette finally arrives Wednesday. We hug in a hospital room where I can't stand up. Lotta comes back. We're three again. From that moment everything's lighter – not better, lighter. Something in my chest lets go that I've been holding for two days. Not the fear – that was controlled. The effort of carrying it all alone.

The first cortisone hit, dropping my pain from 9 to 1 in minutes, warm wave through my body. And the night after, when my heart reacts with arrhythmias and twelve people flood my room. New problem for the doctors here. Old problem for me. I've got a defi in my chest. As far as hearts go, I'm the relaxed one.

Mornings watching the Tour de France, forgetting for an hour where I am. Riders climbing passes I know, on bikes that look like my Dogma, while I lie in a Chicago hospital unable to move my legs. Comforting and cruel at the same time. Comforting because the world out there goes on. Cruel because I'm no longer part of it. Not like that.

Hours on the phone with friends in Germany moving heaven and earth to get me home. An idea from the circle: my health insurance should want to transfer me to a cheaper system. I make the request, get lucky knowing someone there from my work at the Finance Ministry.

The ADAC, still citing statements from a German orthopaedist, ignoring our Chicago medical letters. Friends organise expert opinions, file complaints. 165,000 euros for private transport. The yellow angels are inhuman to the very end.

The treating neurologist, competent and kind. We discuss how to establish fitness to fly per Lufthansa requirements. I'm

slowly mobilised, learn to transfer from bed to wheelchair. Permanent catheter, since I can't feel my bladder anymore.

And Lotta, who one evening during UNO has to say out loud how unfair all of it is. Her anger is justified. I admire her for voicing it instead of swallowing it. She didn't get that from me – she's done it better.

I look at her and say: "Lotta, the other way around would be worse."

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One black night I turn to Headspace. The techniques I first tried a year ago at the Lanserhof. Lying on my back, not allowed to turn, pain in waves, my head wanting to spiral. But I breathe. Ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Until the spiral eases and I fall into something that isn't sleep but at least silence.

And I think: the psychologist at the Lanserhof was right. My parasympathetic system was sulking in a corner and I've slowly brought it back over the past months. Not for everyday life. For these nights.

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After nearly two weeks, done waiting. For the ADAC. For the insurance. For a diagnosis that never comes. I've rarely waited for others to fix my problems. So I book the flights. Just like that. A neurologist at UKE has agreed to take me.

Morning before the flight, moved to a regular ward – first room without the American AC hurricane, view of Lake Michigan. I touch my legs for the first time without flinching. My hand feels the leg. The leg doesn't feel my hand. Like touching someone else's body that happens to be attached to

mine.

Chicago for the last time through a medical transport window. Two weeks in this city, seen nothing but a hotel, a hospital, and the road between them.

On the plane I'm asleep the second we're airborne. Don't wake up till Frankfurt. Deep, solid sleep, as if my body decided the fight for this leg of the journey is over.

We're flying home. And at home the discovery of slowness begins.

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Chapter 11 - Back in Hamburg

July-August 2025 - UKE, Writing, Wheelchair

Arrival in Hamburg and transport to UKE go smoothly thanks to Sönke's prep - 90 minutes after landing I'm in a bed on the ward. At the airport, Sönke, Conny, Juliane, and Lilith see me in a wheelchair for the first time. I can tell they're shocked. And I catch myself smiling automatically - not because things are fine, but because I don't want them worrying more than they already are. Same reflex as the calls with the daughters after the Harz: provide stability, don't seek it. Healthy? No idea. But it's what I can do.

Tired, in pain, stomach trouble. But by end of week one the meds have settled and I can appreciate what makes the real difference: our social network in Hamburg. Friends are practically queuing up. We use UKE's location in the middle of Eppendorf to eat at the local restaurants in the sun. Good moments with great people.

The closeness and encouragement move me every time I think about it. Deep gratitude, above all because what I get isn't pity – it's empathy and support. Big difference. Pity looks down. Empathy looks you in the eye. That's exactly how my friends treat me. As if the wheelchair is a detail, not the headline.

Nette is an incredible help. We eat dinner together, lie in bed together, she helps in the bathroom. Doing these things with someone you're intimate with is a world apart from nurses. But we consciously decide she needs her own time and space and doesn't have to be with me constantly. We've known each other since eleventh grade. We know when the other needs room without saying it.

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First physio sessions make clear: thanks to my morning routines of recent months, I've got a solid upper body foundation. Legs still unresponsive, but I learn to trust my body without feeling in my legs – bending fully forward, for example. Step by step, autonomy comes back.

Exactly one month after Chicago, I leave the bed on my own for the first time and transfer to the wheelchair. I cry. Not grief – the opposite. The feeling of taking back a small piece of my life. Another step away from the red call button that summons nurses and that I hate.

And thanks to months of yoga exercises, I can put on my compression stockings myself. Sounds small. Feels like dignity.

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During UKE I notice: the past 15 months since the Lanserhof were a kind of preparation. Where I used to be just legs, I'd managed to change that and rely on the rest of my body too. Exactly that rest – strong arms, strong core – I now need every moment.

Startling how fast the body changes. My legs, muscular six weeks ago, are wasting to nothing. And since calorie burn without legs is totally different, I have to watch what and how much I eat. Never had to do that before.

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I keep the diary I started in Chicago. Rereading it, the idea grows: give this a bigger form, write up the eventful months since the cardiac arrest. From my calendar, photos, and memories, a chronicle takes shape. Already while writing, I'm surprised and moved by how full and alive those months were. I read my own entries and think: All this in fifteen months? So many places, people, moments? And then: That's exactly why it's worth writing down. Not for others. For me. To not forget what's possible.

My energy, which used to go to my legs, needs an outlet. I feel it turning into creativity, flowing into my head and hands. Finding a first sentence or a title – that's hard. But it comes, and from that moment it's easy to line up sentences and let a chronicle become a narrative.

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Alongside writing and tests, I deal with wheelchair supply. I had the naive assumption you can order a fitted wheelchair online in 2025. You can't. The few shops only carry basic models. So: traditional medical supply companies. But no luck

there either – sales only via field reps, nobody can offer an appointment. Only after a LinkedIn post does something move. Five weeks after first contact I get lucky with a field rep. Then five more weeks for the order and three to six months for delivery. I get now that a proper wheelchair takes more than a few measurements. But the process could be more efficient. The entrepreneur in me can't help it.

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The plasmapheresis is the doctors' last shot. Hope that an autoimmune condition untreatable with cortisone might respond to this. A good friend had his turning point with this treatment years ago, so expectations in my circle are high. I'm more reserved. Stay positive, have courage and will, but don't blank out reality. I've learned not to hang hope too high so the fall isn't too deep.

Doesn't work for me. Worse: a virus finds my clean blood so inviting I spend days bedridden with a 40-degree fever.

Since nothing has worked, transfer to rehab is on the table. Final ward round verdict: because of my cardiac history I've got a circulatory issue which, combined with the flight, led to an unfortunate situation. Bad luck as a diagnosis after seven weeks of analysis. Hard to hear. I can see the doctors are frustrated – they tried everything and at the end stands a word no doctor likes to say. Oddly, I'm the relaxed one in the room. I'm looking forward. To rehab, to what's next. The doctors are looking back at what didn't work. Maybe that's the difference.

Rehab is in Hamburg-Boberg. I know from my own research there are no single rooms. A shared room would be a brutal invasion of my privacy. I'm afraid it'll burden my

psyche enough to hinder recovery.

I call other facilities. Officially patients can choose. In reality the places only want to talk to the hospitals' "social services." Through a contact I reach a director of a Berlin rehab. His advice is simple: stay as close to your family as possible. You'll have low points and want them nearby.

Boberg it is. With a heavy heart.

I enjoyed UKE in a way. The reason and setting aren't exactly enjoyable. But the friends, the conversations, the Eppendorf restaurants, the kind care – and the writing as outlet and pastime. All of it made the weeks bearable.

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Chapter 12 – Boberg

August–September 2025 – Autonomy, Tears, New Reality

First impression of Boberg: time warp to the eighties. Inside and out. But the staff have a very clear view of the problem areas for fresh spinal cord injuries. One focus alongside wheelchair daily life: the urological challenges. Same for me – my near-phobic fear of losing bowel control gets knocked out as quickly as my bad transfer technique. The nurses have a directness that's unsettling at first and then liberating. They don't talk around uncomfortable things. They name them, explain them, move on. Exactly what I need.

First days are empty. Need to be assessed, and I've got wounds from bad transfers at UKE that need to heal. So I sit in the sun on the terrace of the only café in the area, writing and calling.

The surroundings are, amusingly, not wheelchair-friendly. Hilly in every direction. A long, decrepit concrete ramp leads to the main entrance. I master it on my very first attempt – by falling out of the wheelchair. Lying on the ground is not a great experience. I look up at the sky and think two things: One, this is humiliating. Two, this isn't happening again. I want to handle this without calling for help. Won't happen overnight, but there's a path. And that motivates me.

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Ward psychologist visits. It's about my general state and mainly a suicide risk check. She leaves after 45 minutes with: "I wouldn't know what advice to give you – you're doing the right things."

Maybe I should retrain.

Most moments I'm positive, looking ahead. But there are moments that bring tears. When I see runners in the woods. People on the wide beach at SPO. Or when I hear the freewheel of a racing bike hub – that fine, familiar whirring. Deep sadness, fear of never experiencing those things again. Always just seconds. But in those seconds the full force is there – everything I usually push away rises up and hits me unprotected. I try to feel these moments consciously, let them in. Also to draw motivation: to make the way back into the woods or onto the beach possible.

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My fear of roommates is real. First ten days I'm lucky – alone. But every time I enter the room I hold my breath. Absurd: I create safe spaces for others, bring groups together, stand on stages. And here I'm afraid of a second bed. But intimacy is

something quite different from sociability.

Day eleven, it's over. Incredible luck: a kind, attentive, inspiring 25-year-old. Seven years in a wheelchair after a climbing accident. Lives an autonomous life, impressively independent and full of energy. Smokes weed constantly but is a great role model. In three days he shows me more about what a self-determined life in a wheelchair looks like than any therapist in weeks. He leaves after three days.

Next one stays longer. The opposite. Uninspiring, loud, selfish, zero interest. After two days I know everything about him; he hasn't asked me a single question. I reduce communication to the bare minimum.

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My highlights besides visits: physio and, from a certain point, the sport and wheelchair training. Both trigger exactly the ambition and passion I need. First thing since Chicago that feels like sport, not therapy. A difference that changes everything for me.

Swimming. First time in the water - a moment I won't forget. I glide into the pool and suddenly the heaviness is gone. The legs, nothing but weight on land, become light. My body moves - not like before, but it moves - free and weightless. A feeling of freedom I haven't had since Chicago. For a few minutes I'm not a person in a wheelchair. Just a person in the water.

Sport training: mix of cardio and strength, about an hour daily. Goal is further strengthening upper body, arms, and core, since virtually everything I do runs through them.

Wheelchair training four times a week: mastering the device under my backside. Reminds me of childhood attempts on a skateboard and BMX: balance, riding on two wheels, overcoming obstacles. Another reality I face head-on.

Physical situation barely changed since Chicago. Legs live their crazy independent life, twitching uncontrollably. During exercise I feel a pull in the thigh, but real voluntary movement - no. Once-muscular legs are shadows, cost me about eight kilos of body weight. Funny thing: I imagine my feet in completely different positions at different moments. A glance down confuses me every time. What's new and unpleasant: the paralysis belt. Where sensation ends, a permanent ring of pain has formed all around my body. Currently only strong painkillers help.

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My approach in Boberg: find solutions. To leave the clinic more easily I immediately order a wheelchair ramp for our van. Also quickly learn to transfer into a regular car.

I try out the van ramp with Arne and Lars and we find a restaurant on the Elbe. The place is emotionally charged: the Zollenspieker Fährhaus is known to every road cyclist in Hamburg as the typical turnaround point. I've been here fifty times on the racing bike. Now I see familiar bikes from the wheelchair. Hurts briefly. Then I order food and enjoy the evening and think: I'm here. Different device, same place. That counts.

The ramp is also the basis for my plan to go home at weekends. People around me are a bit overwhelmed by this. But Lars builds me a wooden ramp for the way into the house. Two ramps, path cleared faster than expected.

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Autonomy also means finding a permanent way home. Many patients here blank out the possibility they'll stay impaired. I've decided not to. Alongside my will and belief in improvement, I want to face current reality too. Meaning: make a 100-year-old house built for walking people largely barrier-free.

Luckily we have help. The person who renovated our house several times now works at the state office for accessible housing. Our house has four floors including the basement. My first impulse - completely rebuild the ground floor - I reject. It would destroy the feel of our home. So it gets more complex: platform lift at the entrance, stairlift between ground and first floor, bathroom renovation, room swaps. Two floors accessible in step one. External elevator in step two.

For my head it's extremely important to push this alongside rehab and create a space where we all still feel at home. Rebuilding the house isn't an admission. It's a plan. And plans I can do.

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Chapter 13 - Home

September 2025 - Crying in the Kitchen

My plan for Saturday at home works out. Friends and family make it happen, even though a wheelchair tyre bursts on the way.

When I'm in the kitchen of our house, Konrad beside me, view of the terrace – I weep openly. Lotta in my arms, Nette joins us. The moment is overwhelming. Being in this place for the first time in months is so beautiful – and at the same time it's clear: the house and my current state don't go together yet. Our home, the place where I've always felt safest, isn't ready for me. And I'm not ready for it. Maybe the hardest realisation since Chicago.

Hard. But it motivates me to solve these things.

First day home is beautiful and exhausting. Emotions, friends stopping by, my ambition to be the tech handyman again – all at once, too much. We'll learn for next time. But I wouldn't have missed a second.

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Day by day it gets clearer: alongside the discovery of slowness, another principle will shape my new life. Nothing happens casually anymore.

Putting on shoes, opening a window, brushing teeth – I still have to think about the most efficient way to get there. That'll change, I'll find routines. But it stays: nothing happens casually anymore. And I notice I have a choice. Be annoyed at every one of these small things and mourn the old life. Or develop a new awareness – one where every mastered task isn't an irritation but a small success.

And then the word that's taken on new meaning: finality. Again and again, moments where I realise I may never be able to do certain things myself again. A walk with Nette and Konrad. Jumping up spontaneously. My beloved cycling. Seconds of deep sadness. I let them in. And then I look

forward again, because the alternative is none.

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In the middle of rehab, Lilith moves out. Nine months in Milan. My emotions nearly tear me apart – proud and happy for her on one side, she'll be terribly missed on the other. She wrestled with whether to go in the current situation. Nette's message and mine: You have to live your life.

And that's what she's doing.

I'd pictured the first move-out differently. Carrying boxes, drilling holes, connecting lamps. My role will be different for now. It hurts that I can't be what I want to be: the dad who pitches in. Instead I'm the dad watching from the wheelchair, giving advice. That too is a form of letting go.

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Birthday in the middle of rehab. First impulse: nothing to celebrate. Next breath: No, that's wrong. Of course there is. I'm here. Must be the Rhineland soul – celebrating always works.

Restaurant in Ottensen. Small group, mainly the people helping us in daily life. Afternoon: Cologne friends pick me up from rehab for an art exhibition. Evening is perfect – long table I can move around well, good food, great service, and above all a lively atmosphere.

Another milestone that evening: first time using a public toilet alone in a restaurant. Sounds small. It isn't. Another piece of normality reclaimed. The piece where you get up, go to the bathroom, and think nothing of it. That thinking-nothing-of-it is something I first have to earn back.

Glad we decided to celebrate this birthday. Because that's what I've learned in the past fifteen months: collect moments. Don't wait till everything's perfect. Celebrate because you're here.

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Since October I'm home. Traded the Boberg lab for reality – a daily life that takes shape bit by bit, nothing simulated. No protected framework, no call button, no therapist around the corner. Just our house, my family, Konrad, and life as it is now.

Every day I see things that don't work anymore. And every day I fight to win things back.

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Chapter 14 – Letting Go of the Dogma

The Final Chapter

Fascinating what it does to the body. Legs and backside dissolving – I've written about that. But in return, upper body and arms change with about two hours of daily training faster than I thought. Let's see if my once-pudgy torso turns into a V.

Quickly clear: I'll keep doing sport. Besides strength training, sports from my youth return to the radar – basketball and table tennis. Gave both up at some point because of bad knees. Since the knees are now irrelevant, I can rediscover them. I'm aware of the irony. And it makes me grin. Life takes my legs and gives me my knees back. You need a certain sense of humour to find that funny. I've got it.

Early autumn brings the sun back and I enjoy testing boundaries. Can I handle forest paths? Get on the train? What's a concert like? Can we keep our theatre subscription? Can I visit friends? Each question I answer myself – by trying. And every time the answer is yes, something grows in me. Not triumph. More a quiet satisfaction. The world isn't shrinking. It just looks different.

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Was all of it – the last fifteen months – just preparation?

The question comes almost automatically when I get up in the morning and move with my arms and core. Or put on my compression stockings. Since I don't believe in fate or a higher power, it's probably coincidence. But what a coincidence.

Yoga. Stability training. Meditation. Inner calm. Contentment. Upper body strength. All built up between cardiac arrest and paraplegia – with no idea what for. Not a conscious preparation. But a preparation. Without the psychologist at the Lanserhof, without Headspace, without the morning routine, without the strength training – I'd be in much worse shape. Body and head.

And maybe that's the insight this book should leave behind: you never know what you're getting strong for. It's worth looking after your body and mind – not for the worst case, but because it makes life better every moment. And in the worst case, it can make all the difference.

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My Dogma is what's called a company bike in Germany. For long-term absence my employer offers early termination of the lease.

I left the letter sitting for a long time. Accepting would have felt like a betrayal of my old life and this dream bike. Returning the Dogma meant letting go of something more than a bicycle. The statement in favour of the fast life. The kid from Remscheid who bought his first Peugeot for 680 Deutschmarks. Every sunset ride, every Alpine pass, every fine whirring of the hub in freewheel.

I returned it. And it hurt.

It hurt because it was an admission. Not that I'm giving up – but that something has changed that I can't reverse. Not now. Not like this. Signing the letter, I think of the Wednesday in Hamburg when I stood in front of that bike and thought: How much longer are you going to be sensible? Now the answer is different. Now sensible isn't the opposite of living. It's part of it.

But I've learned that letting go isn't the end. It's the moment when space opens for something new.

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I traded the Dogma for a recumbent.

Everything about it is different. The perspective, the speed, the feeling. I'm no longer sitting above the road but almost on it. The wind is different, the world is from a different angle. The sounds aren't the same.

But it's fun. Real fun. And I'm outside again, moving, landscape going by, and I feel what I've felt since the Peugeot

at 14: freedom on two wheels. Not the same feeling. Never will be. But it is a feeling. And after months in bed, in a wheelchair, in hospitals and rehab – a feeling of movement and wind and road is more than I dared hope.

It's not my Dogma. It'll never be my Dogma. But it's mine.

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In the spring of 2024 I lost consciousness on a campsite in the Harz and fifteen minutes later got a second life. In the summer of 2025 I lost the feeling in my legs in a Chicago hospital and started a third.

From a diary born in a crisis came a script, then a chronicle, and finally this narrative. I didn't want to preach and still don't. All I can say is that life gives me great joy and I'm happy to live it – whatever obstacles it puts in front of me and the people I love.

The other way around would be worse.

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Blurb

In May 2024, André M. Bajorat dies at a campsite in Germany's Harz Mountains. For fifteen minutes. His wife and friends bring him back. What follows: fifteen months of life, gratitude, and new rituals – meditation instead of constant noise, yoga instead of restlessness, upper body training instead of just legs. André learns to slow down without standing still.

Until Chicago, where everything starts over. Only this time differently.

Within days he loses the feeling in both legs. The diagnosis after seven weeks: bad luck. What's left is a wheelchair, a house not built for him, and the question: was everything he learned in the months before an unconscious preparation for this exact moment?

The Other Way Around Would Be Worse is the story of a man who has to learn twice what matters. Who returns his dream racing bike and finds freedom on a recumbent. Who tells his daughter in a dark night in Chicago: the other way around would be worse – and means it.

A book about fearlessness and vulnerability. About friendship as life insurance. About letting go and taking back. And about the question of why it's worth looking after your body and mind – not for the worst case, but because it makes every moment better.

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About the Author

In the spring of 2024 I survived sudden cardiac death after a hike in the Harz Mountains, thanks to my wife and extraordinary friends. It changed me. I adjusted my behaviour and priorities. Since the summer of 2025 I've been – at least temporarily – paraplegic, finding new possibilities and thinking a lot about why I might process these events differently from others. Though I wouldn't want to compare.

My name is André M. Bajorat. Born 1971 in Wuppertal, grew up in Remscheid, learned to love real life in Cologne from 1993. My wife and I have been together since 1990. Two nearly grown-up kids. We've lived in the Hamburg area since the late nineties.

Professionally: a university dropout who was in the right place at the right time a few times. Built something others call a career, though it was never important to me. Today I work part-time for Germany's largest asset manager and run the fintech platform paymentandbanking.com with friends, where I can regularly be heard as a podcast host and seen on stage.

Photos: Helena Heilig and Ziska Thalhammer