

Las Vegas

From Finding Kansas: Decoding the Enigma of Asperger's Syndrome.
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I've written snippets of my experience in October 2003 in other pieces, but I've decided to write a stand-alone piece that will describe the events of that roller-coaster month.

Two thousand and three had been a rough year. I had a serious knee injury in May, I had my dog put to sleep in June, I hadn't driven a racecar in over a year, and my mom had gone temporarily insane and I had moved to my dad's house. This move took a toll on all my friendships and relationships. The move was sort of like pausing a CD, in the sense that when the move was made all relationships were frozen. Time moved on like it always does, but for me all relationships were frozen. Don't get me wrong, I still interacted, but I did nothing to gain or lose anything, as I was unable to assess the gains and losses.

Enter the month of September. My dad had formerly done advertisements for the Derek Daly Driving Academy in Las Vegas. So on a long shot he called out and asked if there were any openings for instructors. In a bizarre turn of events, luck was on my side, and there was in the month of October when they were going to have a bunch of corporate parties out. I was invited to become an instructor for a month, and needless to say, that made my year.

My girlfriend at the time seemed to have mixed emotions about it. From what I deduced it seemed to be jealousy. My belief is she got mad that I was going to be making quite a bit of money, but I never had gone to college, so I didn't really deserve it. Whatever the case may have been, our relationship started to take that left turn behind the wall (racing analogy) at that point in time. As mentioned in prior writings, she did everything she could to avoid seeing me. And in some instances, she flat out lied about seeing me (see "Emily"). I would go into details about that, but it's been covered and I don't really feel like typing it out once more.

October 4 was upon me, and it was time to start my journey. This was going to be my first trip away from home by myself away from family for more than two days. Also this would be the first time I was in excess of three hundred miles away from any family. Add on top all of that and the family I was staying with I had never met. It was truly a journey into the unknown.

The morning of the fourth was an odd one. I got up around four in the morning so I could make as many miles as I could before needing that all-important sleep. Before I left, my stepmom and dad talked to me in the living room. The conversation was one like one would have if they were off to war. I was in a half awake and half-asleep state that I don't remember the exact words, but after a lengthy goodbye it was off to the gas station for a Red Bull. Any time I drive anywhere of great distance I have the routine of drinking a Red Bull. The can says energy drink, and I don't know if it works or if it's just a sugar pill, but it is required for me to start a journey.

By the time I got about two miles from my house the trip started to sink in, or rather it was sort of like waking up from a nap and having no idea where you're going or why you are even in a car. I quickly called my dad and asked him, "Umm, where am I going again?" Of course I knew the destination, but to get there I was blank. He told me, and I quickly regained my bearings and it was to Interstate 70 for what would be the most triumphant drive of my life.

The sun hadn't cracked yet as I pulled on to I-70, as the time was about 4:50. My fuel was full and many a mile of road lay ahead. I noticed something on this first leg of my journey, and that was the fact that time flies when it's dark. The sun started to become pronounced as I entered Columbia, Missouri. While driving through Columbia, I had a flashback of my prior experiences there. My first unofficial girlfriend, Michelle (I never really have written about her because there wasn't much to say, as she didn't really say much), was attending

college at Mizzou. I recalled the time I bowled in the travel league there. Ironically, that's the first time I saw Emily when I saw her at the hotel. How could I forget the other teams throwing chicken into the swimming pool?

Just as fast as my mind thought of that I was through Columbia and had knocked down ninety of 1,600 miles. My goal for the day would be to get to at least the Colorado border.

Traffic got really heavy as I crossed Kansas City and entered the west side of town. That same day a NASCAR Busch series race was going to be run at the Kansas speedway. After about twenty miles of going twenty miles an hour I was "green" again and back up to speed.

My first refuel stop came past Kansas City right before the turnpike. What was very peculiar was the fact that the three cars I had been following all stopped at this same gas station. I remember that trio of cars well because one was a Ford Taurus with US GOVT. license plates, and the person who refilled the car looked to be a highly decorated airman. It hit me at that point that I would probably never see this person again. I don't know how or why, but instantly, like film, that person and car were imposed into my brain like film (title of "film" coming soon). I realized that everything I was going to see and drive through I may not pass through again, and then I was reminded of this song that was sung in second grade. I don't remember most of the words or melodies, but the finale line of each verse was, "Friend, I'll say goodbye because I may not pass this way again."

After my little bout of emotions, it was time to trudge on. I had always heard that Kansas was boring, and people don't lie. No offense to anyone in Kansas, but I salute you because to see such dull scenery day in and day out would have to drive you to the brink of insanity. I refueled somewhere before the Colorado border, and by this time it was about 2:00 p.m. I was getting a bit weary eyed, but I had to keep going to make it just a one-night drive.

To keep me up, I stopped early for fuel and at the same time got another Red Bull (just for your knowledge, this isn't an advertisement or testimonial about Red Bull) and food. I bought some shelled sunflower seeds and a Wild Cherry Pepsi. The clerk lady asked me where I was headed, and I responded that my destination was Vegas and that I had left St. Louis some eleven hours prior. She was rather impressed that someone at my age would be making that trek. She wished me good luck, and as I walked through the door once, I knew I'd never be there again. As I entered my car and drove away, it finally hit me what I was actually doing, and the trigger of all things were those sunflower seeds.

Every time I remember my family going to the panhandle of Nebraska, my dad would get unseeded seeds. So when I got them, I realized that I was writing my own chapter in my life and that I was doing it by myself. It was the first time that I actually felt independent of all others.

Now a couple of paragraphs ago I gave a condemnation to people who live in Kansas. I now have to give a recommendation to those poor souls who live in the eastern half of Colorado. Why would I do this? In Kansas, there are wheat and sunflower fields, so in the least there's something to look at. In the first part of Colorado, the land is barren, the traffic is sparse, and the Rocky Mountains loom in the distance, barely visible, and there is nothing else around. Even the truck stops were barren and boring compared to others around the country. If I lived there, I would go insane, and for no reason whatsoever I would move to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

As those Rocky Mountains in the distance remained in the distance hour after hour, my reflexes were slipping rapidly. The Red Bull may increase awareness in a normal person, but to one who has been driving for twelve-plus hours, its effects are minimal. I had passed Limon and after that the next stop of significance was Denver, so I was pretty much committed regardless of sleep to make it to Denver.

At about six o'clock in the evening I finally reached Denver, and those mountains were now not too far off. I had an inkling to drive farther, but thankfully my senses prevailed and I stopped at the American Inn due north

of downtown. This would be my first experience in actually stopping at a hotel and ordering a room by myself. I did this process perfectly (well, can someone screw it up?), and I immediately headed for my room.

My intentions were to go to sleep right away, but the hotel had Speed channel, and they had a USAC Sprint Car race from Indianapolis Raceway Park on. I watched that and went to sleep shortly thereafter around 7:30.

My banking institution inquiring as to why my ATM card was being used all across Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado rudely awakened me at 9:00 p.m. I talked rather angrily toward the person, saying that I was on a trip. After that I was right back asleep.

About 2:00 in the morning I woke up wide-awake. By the way my body was refreshed I thought it was eight or nine. I looked at my cell phone and was shocked that it was just two in the morning. I tried but failed on returning to sleep, so I packed up and headed to my car to check out.

While driving away from the hotel and back onto the Interstate, I decided to refuel. This refueling for some reason gave me a special feeling inside. I don't know if it's because I was now less than fourteen hours away from Vegas, or if it was because I was where I was by myself and I was doing it with no fear. I didn't think about that for too long, and after the car was full I went in and got myself some ... you guessed it, Red Bull.

Very quickly, there was great contrast between the wasteland of eastern Colorado and what was to come. It started quickly by seeing a horrible roadside crash in the eastbound lanes. After that, it was much like being at the top of a roller coaster about to descend into excitement.

Within an hour I was in the most scenic part of America I had ever seen, and this was at 3:00 in the morning. I could tell that the hills on each side of the road were staggeringly high. As each small resort town passed, the roads became windier and the mountains higher. This was the most fun bit of road I had ever driven on by far.

I did exceed the speed limits in places, and I was making excellent time because in that part of the country in the middle of night, there is virtually no one to be seen. In fact, the only people I saw were two workers in a tunnel washing the tiles on the side of the tunnel.

Time once again was going by fast and right as the sun broke, I was at the Utah- Colorado border. As the sun shone over the hills, I saw the vast mesas and mountains of this region. It was so beautiful that I nearly drove my Maxima right off the road. I wish I had a camera then so I could describe to you just how awe-inspiring that sight was.

Because I had gotten up at such a wee hour, my body was getting tired, so somewhere near Green River, Utah, I pulled off onto one of the scenic lookouts and took a nap. I couldn't believe I was doing this. I felt so alive while taking that nap because that was something I never thought I would do.

Two hours later, it was go time once again, and I'm thankful I refueled there, because for the next what seemed to be one thousand miles the only exits were labeled "ranch exits." Then, after a while, I would get to one of the most depressing interchanges of my life.

All my life I have lived on or near I-70. That interstate runs through my former hometown of Indianapolis, and it is a main thoroughfare of St. Louis. On numerous occasions we have taken that road east to see my aunt in Washington D.C. But now, on this October 5 day, I was reaching the end of this interstate. I guess for the normal person this would be a moot point and just a transition from I-70 to I-15, but for me it was almost like losing a friend. I had been on I-70 for nearly one thousand miles, and we were almost like buddies, and now it was the end. And when I say end, it's a very abrupt end as if you were to bypass the exits you would end up in the side of a rock face.

As choked up as I was, I made that turn to the south and got on I-15. This would be the road that would lead me to my destination. I was good on fuel until just after the Nevada- Arizona border, and as I got out I still had my leather jacket on. What a surprise I found when the air temperature was a steamy one hundred. It was definitely a stark contrast to the fall-like weather of Denver.

It was now about 1:00 p.m. when finally, finally I had completed my 1,660-mile quest. Because it was only 1:00 p.m. Vegas time, I decided to stop by the office of the Academy just to see if anyone was home. I had been there on two previous occasions, so I knew where it was and I knew the layout. I asked one of the mechanics, whom I had never seen before, if Jeff, the manager guy, was around. He replied that he was with two special clients on the Inner Road Course. The facilities at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway have many tracks and the Academy uses two of them, the Inner Road Course, which lies within the oval that NASCAR uses, and an Outer Road Course, which, when NASCAR runs there, is used as a parking lot and heliport.

Because of the fact I had never been on the IRC, I wasn't about to just drive to the infield and say hello. I was just going to wait for them to come back to the office. It wasn't like I had anything else to do. The family I was staying with wasn't getting back to their home in Henderson (which is about thirty-five miles south of the track which lies about fifteen miles north of the famous Strip) until 5:00 p.m.

During my wait, I was listening to the NASCAR race on the radio, and about an hour later Jeff came back to the office. I got out of my car, and he instantly remembered me and said, "Ah, Mr. Likens, I see you've made it!" I had made it indeed.

That day there were just two students, and I went with them to the IRC just to watch and wait. As that day concluded, my nerves started to get frazzled as I realized that I was less than an hour from meeting the family with whom I would be staying for three weeks. As I left the track, I asked when I would be needed and they said not officially until the fifteenth, but I could come to the track and help out if I'd like. This was different from what I had understood, because I thought I was going to be needed right away, but I wasn't going to complain.

As I made my way from the track and to the house where I would be staying, anxiety took over. Would these people be freaks? Would they have some sort of strange eating habits or play loud music? The only thing I knew for sure was that the lady's name was Sundance, her husband's, Frankie, and that Sundance was a church secretary. Other than that, I knew nothing. Would I have my own room and/or television? There were so many unknowns that would be known in less than an hour.

I drove cautiously as I approached Horizon Ridge Road, and I exited the I-215 and got off. I had a map my dad had made me, but it was outdated and I was having a heck of a time finding Snowgoose Drive. When I finally found it, they were just getting home themselves. I helped them unload the groceries they had bought and introduced myself. They introduced themselves, and I instantly felt welcomed. I was shown my room, which had its own television and a fish tank. They had bought bed covers for me and a pillowcase (which I still use to this day!). I set up my video games and then it was time for dinner.

Now, mind you, I'm a picky eater, and on the first night in this new household they were having tacos, and I despise tacos with a passion, but it would be rude to turn it down, so for the first time in my life I ate tacos. They weren't bad, but I wouldn't care to have them again, unless, of course, Frankie was to make them again.

After Sundance showed me her cats, I went straight to bed, as I wanted to get to the Academy early to learn everything I could about what I would be doing. So on Monday, October 6, I was at the track for the first time in a non-student role. I was performing duties of an instructor on that day and all of that week but wasn't being paid for it. It didn't matter, as I was around the cars and was driving a BMW Z3 every once in a while and also serving as flagman, so I didn't care a bit about pay. In fact, to be honest with you, I would have paid them to do what I was doing.

That week passed, and it started out a bit rocky with me being overguarded and shy, but as the week went on, I slowly crept into my element. At week's end, another instructor whose name is b.c. went out with me and we drove around in separate Z3s and he helped me learn the optimal lines in a GT car. Then he drove me around, and then rode with me, and it really helped me in that he was willing to help me out and talk to me. After that, I was right at home at the Derek Daly Academy.

The atmosphere at the house was great. Our sleep schedules were off, so it was as if it was my house. I rarely saw Sundance, Frankie, or their daughter, Illana. But nagging at me at the same time were thoughts of home. Not homesickness mind you, but what to do with Emily, but because that's covered in another paper it will be left blank on this one.

The day before I officially started working, I went to the Boulder City public golf course to play, and this course was class "A" fabulous. If you have ever seen the movie Casino, you've seen this course. What was really odd about this round of golf was the fact that I was paired with someone else, and for the first time I didn't mind it. The guy who drove the golf cart was a retired machinist, and I heard all about Boulder City and the surrounding areas and the difference in people from Boulder City and Los Angeles. And do you want to know the weird part about this? It was weird because I actually listened. For once in my life, I cared about some irrelevant old man's talk. Forever before this, I hated being paired with someone while playing golf because the last thing I wanted to hear was small talk, but now because I was in my element, I actually was enjoying it. It didn't hurt that I started the round with four consecutive birdies.

Later that day, I went to the mall by the Sundance Station Casino and actually talked to a couple of random people. One person I talked to for about an hour and a half while she worked the Dippin Dots stand. I learned and asked what there was to do in the surrounding areas but was even more shocked that I, Aaron Likens, was talking to people and actually starting the conversations. I had started on the drug Lexapro a week prior to coming out to Vegas, but I doubt that was the reason why I was opening up. My hypothesis was, for the first time in my life I was happy. I was happy because I knew that tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that I was going to go really fast in a racecar and that was all that mattered.

The thirteenth to the seventeenth was a corporate event, and I worked about ten hours each day, arriving at the track at about five in the morning and staying till 3:00 p.m. or later. I didn't mind, though, because this was paradise. It was all I ever wanted and more. After each day's work, I either stopped at the Petro station and ordered a T-bone for \$9.99, or I got a pizza from Villa Pizza when I got back home. Whatever I did, it was the best!

The weekend saw another short session, and then on Monday I was off. I knew my tenure was running thin by this point, so I went to play another round of golf. I didn't shoot as well, but I had fun and that's all that matters. On this day, I also made my one and only trip to the Strip.

When I had been there previously as a student, my dad and I stayed at Circus Circus, so I decided to go there. It didn't hurt that they have a good arcade. When I got there and parked, I was overwhelmed with emotion. Memories started to flood back into my mind as if a levee had broken. Even though the year was 2003, for me and my videographic mind, it was 2000 and 2001 and my dad was with me. I could see as I walked by the Steak House my dad and me sitting at this certain table talking about the successful day I had, and I could see as I walked through the Adventuredome the miniature golf course my dad played mini golf at and the holes he got his holes in one at. To say the least, it was overwhelming and after just one dollar spent on a game of "Dance Dance Revolution," I got out of there very hastily.

With that behind me, I went back to the house and went to bed early, as the next two days were going to be long ones once more. Those days passed and it was now the twenty-third and I had just one day left scheduled to work and that was just going to be a half-day school. As celebration of my achievements, Sundance and her family took me out for a prime rib dinner.

I get down a lot about people, and I often forget the kindness of people like Sundance. I was just a kid from St. Louis, and she was nice enough to change out a room so I had one, and now she was taking me out for a prime rib dinner. People like that come few and far between. The dinner was over, and once again I went to bed early so I could get up early and work my final day. I wanted to be perfect on this day so I would be called upon again because, as I mentioned before, this was paradise. I mean, I had never had so much energy before. This trip would be like a person who is a great piano player, but all their life they've played on a small piano that was out of tune, but now they're getting to go to a great cathedral and play on a great organ for a month.

But, as you should very well know, something weird should be happening soon. I mean, I've written now nearly seven pages and nothing horrific, terrifying, or bad has really happened. I feel some people may read this for the same reason people watch auto racing, and that's waiting for the big one, and my big one was about to happen, but not in the way you're going to think it's going to happen.

As soon as I got to the track, I went to set up the half-day course. I got the cones in place and the cars washed and I was set to go. About forty minutes before the students were set to arrive, I was asked to replace these two ceiling tiles in the classroom. I said no problem, as I didn't want to disappoint anyone, so I went to the classroom to tackle this ceiling tile issue. The ceiling tiles, though, were, of course, on the ceiling, so to get to them, I stood on the table. I managed to get one in right, but the other one wasn't fitting properly. I struggled for about five minutes and then it came down on me. The last thing I wanted was to break it, so I attempted to catch it and in the process I stepped off the table and onto what I thought was the back of a chair I had placed by me. Big mistake! I didn't step on the back, but rather the arm, and it flipped over faster than a spinning SUV and I took a head dive.

I don't know exactly what my head hit, but all signs pointed to a Goodyear tire used for demonstrations. I was out for an unknown amount of time until another instructor found me. They instantly called the LVMS crash response team and, before I knew what was going on, I was loaded in an ambulance and headed to some hospital I had never heard of. This was very scary because I was coming in and out of consciousness and I'm 1600 miles away from home and no one knows that I'm going to the hospital and all in all it was bad.

Because of the neck injury, I was admitted to the ER right away and was given pain medication right away. I really wish they had mentioned the whole "take with food" catch because I hadn't eaten anything prior to this. Within thirty minutes, I was throwing up. Mind you, I was throwing up while in a cervical collar. I was so alone. Beside me was a victim of a car accident (you would've thought of all things, that's why, if any, I would go to the hospital), and her mother actually attended to me while I threw up.

A couple hours passed and the nice mother's daughter was discharged, so I was alone, but not for long, as Sundance made her way to the hospital to stay with me. I was in the hospital a total of nearly six hours as they lost my CAT scan a couple times and in the process I threw up a personal record of fifteen times. After the hospital, Sundance had some work to finish up at the church where she worked, so we went there.

I slept in the pastor's office, and not too long after we were headed back up to the speedway to get my car. By this time, Frankie had joined us, and he drove my car back to the house. Sadly, the bizarre world I live in would get worse for me.

The doctors prescribed Soma for my pain, and little did I know that I was allergic to it. So, on Sunday, the twenty-sixth, while heading to church, I lost control of my bodily movements and slowly turned into a vegetable. This necessitated another trip to the hospital where they gave me some IVs, and within three hours I was back to normal but was told not to take the Soma again (wow, who'da thunk that advice?).

By this time I knew I was never going to be an instructor again, and I had no idea what other horrible stuff lay in store for me, so I rested on Monday and on that day I told Sundance I was going to head back to St. Louis the next day. She said I should wait at least a week to let my severe cervical strain and possible slight concussion have more time to

heal, but I was so frustrated with the turn of events, I just wanted to be home in my own bed. I knew emotionally I was going to be unable to stand the goodbyes, so I had to leave quickly.

So, on that Monday, I went to sleep at 4:00 p.m. and woke up at midnight. I woke Frankie, as he told me to, so he could lock the door behind me. As we headed toward the door, he gave me his keychain thing that has the text and colors of his native Guam. He told me that I was a joy to have around the house and that he and Sundance would miss me. I held back and simply stated the same thing but in reverse and got in my car and left Snowgoose Drive.

Once again, I had Red Bull, and I knew that driving past the exit of the LVMS was going to be tough. I passed the track at 12:45 a.m. and was headed home. I made great time once again in the dark and made it past Denver, but Limon was going to be my limit. Once again I got myself a hotel room and then went to dinner at the Fireside Grill, and, boy, was that one of the best steaks I have ever had. For one, it was a steak of achievement as this was the start of the end of my journey, and secondly, it was just really good.

I went back to the hotel room and went to sleep, and at 3:00 a.m. I was back on the road. Within four hours, though, I got tired, so once again I slept at a rest stop and within an hour and a half, I would start the final journey home.

If I had been able to feel emotion at that time, the entire drive probably would've had tears. But it didn't, and I drove and drove and drove. I made it from Limon to Saint Louis with nothing out of the ordinary happening, minus the fact that my neck hurt so badly, and by the time I was home, I could not turn it one way or the other. I kept in contact with my dad on my way home and he was waiting on the front porch, and as I rounded the corner and pulled onto my street, he waved a checkered flag, which was a great symbolic gesture that I had finished my first great journey by myself.

Sadly, though, after that my memory goes rather blank. I remember a snippet here and a snippet there. I know I attended Handel's Messiah, because I have two ticket stubs in my car, so I'm assuming I took Emily, but I don't remember. The Lexapro really messed me up after that trip, and except for one experience in Indianapolis with a friend (I still can't write about that!) my memory is totally blank up until April of 2004.

I do remember driving home from Vegas, and I rethought it again after my conversation that Christmas night that it is true that, "Friend, let me say goodbye, because I may not pass this way again." How true that is.