

could read as fast as me, maybe even faster. And she read exciting things: books by Asimov, Bradbury, and Heinlein. I immediately began reading them, too. But I was far too shy and insecure to ever tell her how I felt about her. So we just talked and read and fixed tape recorders and walked into town every day.

That was Aspergian dating, circa 1972.

The Dogs Begin to Fear Me

Any child will tell you that even the kindest and gentlest of dogs will bite if you yank its ears and pull its tail long enough. There is a dark side to Asperger's, and it comes from our childhood dealings with people who do not treat us the way they would like to be treated. As I grew older, it seemed as though there were very few people who made me feel loved. Little Bear was one of them. My father's parents also stuck by me. I used to visit them every summer in Georgia. They lived in Lawrenceville, a small town about an hour outside Atlanta.

In my thirteenth summer, my grandparents picked me up at the airport, the way they always did. My grandmother Carolyn was the first person I saw when I walked off the plane. She ran up and grabbed me and I squirmed away. I was getting a little big to be grabbed.

"Ooooooooooh. John Elder! Look at you! You've grown so big! You are so handsome!"

I squirmed some more, but I really liked the way they were always so proud of me and so glad to see me. No one else was.

"Your uncle Bob is coming up this weekend and he said he was taking you driving! Ooooooooooh lordy, my baby boy driving a car!"

She led me downstairs to baggage claim, and out to where my

grandfather Jack's Cadillac was idling in the no-parking zone at the curb. I climbed in and pointed the air conditioner vents at my face as we drove out of the airport.

It felt good to be back in Georgia.

That weekend, Bob and I got in my grandmother's new car. It was a Buick Electra 225, a burgundy two-door. I was a little nervous, but I moved the power seat forward until I could reach the pedals. I had been driving the farm equipment since I was twelve, but now I was about to drive a car. On a road.

"If you can drive a tractor, you can drive the Buick." That was easy for him to say. After all, the car belonged to my grandmother, not him. And as huge as it seemed, it was considerably smaller than my grandfather's Fleetwood.

"It's a lot easier to drive than the tractor. It's got an automatic transmission and power steering."

I drove the big tractor on the roads all the time, when I mowed or raked or did other work. It was a red Massey Ferguson. If my grandmother asked, "Can you get me some fertilizer and number six shotgun shells at the store, honey child?" I even drove the tractor all the way into town. Sometimes I drove to the Baskin-Robbins to get ice cream. I parked in the parking lot with the cars and went inside. I had to drive as fast as that tractor would go to get home before the ice cream melted.

I wasn't scared of tractors because they didn't go very fast. But the car was different. I put it in gear and touched the gas very carefully. The car leaped ahead, and I quickly slammed on the brakes. We skidded to a stop on the white sand driveway. Luckily, there was no one there to see us.

"Gentle, son," my uncle said.

Very carefully, I let off the brake. The car started rolling. Very gently, I pushed the brake. The car stopped. My uncle was right. It was easy to steer. And it had a lot of power.

We made it to the end of the driveway without a crash. I stopped where the dirt drive came out of the woods onto High-

way 27, right where I would turn the mower around if I was on the tractor. The pavement shimmered in the heat, and every now and then a car went speeding past. I looked across the street to Matthews Pond, where I caught largemouth bass that my grandmother cleaned and cooked for dinner.

"It's okay. Look both ways, and pull out onto the road," Bob reassured me from the passenger seat.

We pulled out onto the road. I gave the car a little gas, and all of a sudden the speedometer showed 40.

"This car's got the four fifty-five engine and a four barrel. It's fast," Bob said.

My grandfather always got the best of everything. I touched the brakes to make sure I could stop, and the tires gave a little chirp. We headed for my great-grandmother's house, a mile or so up the road. My uncle and I called her Mamaw. She was ancient and small and didn't go anywhere anymore. When I was little, I thought she'd fought in the Civil War, which wasn't true, but she was born only a little while after. She lived in a brick ranch house about two miles up the road from my grandparents. She had snowballs made from aluminum foil in her cupboard, and she fed us goulash and fried okra.

Mamaw had never seen me drive the tractor and was very impressed that I could drive.

"Oh Lordy, John Elder, look at you! You've grown so big! And now you're driving!"

She's just as excited as my grandmother. They even sound the same, I thought to myself. She just didn't show it as much because she was so old. I was pleased and proud, but I was careful not to let on, because I knew by this time that *real men* did not show emotions over things like this.

She fussed around in the kitchen, looking for snacks. My relatives down South always fed me when I came around. My grandmother bought ice cream in five-gallon buckets just for me.

"You'll be a grown man soon, with your own car! Did you

know my daddy had the first car in Chickamauga? He had it shipped in from Chattanooga on the train."

I wiggled my ears. All these thousands of cars around me, and my great-great-grandfather had the first one in town. Of course, Chickamauga was a smaller town than Lawrenceville, but even so . . . Woof. I was impressed. I had a real motorcar pedigree.

Mamaw stood in the door to see me drive off. I backed out of the driveway and turned the wheel. I lined the car up, ready to shift into drive. I moved forward, but there was a problem. I got confused. The interactions were too much. The brakes. The gas pedal. The steering wheel. The shift lever.

I failed to properly coordinate the sequential operations of the various controls, and the Buick ended up in the ditch, on top of the mailbox. In Georgia, there was always a ditch at the edge of the road.

My uncle, who had gotten out of the car and was proudly watching me drive all by myself, quickly jumped back to avoid being flattened.

"John Elder, look what you did! You wrecked the car! You ran over the mailbox!"

"Ooooooooooooooh, John Elder!" said Mamaw.

My uncle stepped over to the car and put it in park. I got out.

My uncle climbed in and backed the Buick into the street. We looked it over. The chrome didn't seem damaged. The mailbox seemed all right, too, just bent a little where it had been yanked out of the ground. I tried to put it back, but the hole was way too big and the mailbox just fell over. It seemed ruined. All of a sudden, I was frantic.

"It's gonna be okay," Bob said. "We'll go back and get the posthole digger and fix it."

Bob drove us back home. Out behind the house, he had a shed filled with boxes of nuts and bolts, old tools, lawn mowers, and all sorts of nameless junk. Dandy—my great-grandfather—had filled the shed with all manner of wood-handled agricultural tools.

Uncle Bob chose a tool with two long handles coming up from a steel bucket.

I was fascinated. I had never noticed the posthole digger before. It looked like a metal clamshell with long handles. That was a tool that could do a lot more than dig postholes in a farmer's field.

I carried it out to the car. My uncle drove. I figured one trip was enough for me for a while.

"I can dig the hole," I said. I was anxious to try it out.

"I better do it, John Elder. We need to get finished before Mama gets home and finds out what we did to her car." Bob called my grandmother Mama. I called her Carolyn.

Bob rammed the digger down into the ground and picked up a bite of dirt. In a few minutes, he had a hole almost two feet deep. We replanted the mailbox and packed the dirt around the pole.

When we got back, I took the posthole digger out of the trunk. I walked over beside the shed and banged it into the ground, just like my Uncle Bob had done. It was hard work!

Two days later, I had dug a hole as deep as the handles were tall. I had dug as far as I could. There were so many things I could do with my new hole.

Jump in with a machine gun, and it's a foxhole.

Put some paper on top, and it's a pit trap.

Drop the dog inside, and it's a dog jail.

For the rest of the summer, I dug holes. I wanted to take the posthole digger home, but my grandparents said they needed it there.

When I went back to Massachusetts, I went to the basement to see what my father had for farming tools. He had a posthole digger, too.

I went into the front yard and started going at it. Before the hole was knee deep, I was stopped by rock. I moved over a few feet and the same thing happened. Pretty soon I had filled the front yard with rock-bottomed holes.

I hadn't hit rock in Georgia. That was just one more reason it was nicer down there.

We had a large pile of wood mulch to the side of the house. My father had gotten a truckload of the stuff to spread around and make the yard look nice. But he never did it, so the mulch was still there, decomposing, where the truck had dumped it. I decided that would be a good place to dig a deeper hole. There should not be any rocks in the wood chip pile.

Sure enough, it was easy to dig in wood chips. I hit rock again, but this time the hole was at least five feet deep. I was ready to try it out.

"Varmint, come outside. We have a hole to test," I yelled in the window. He was sitting in his room, wrapped in aluminum foil, looking at the pictures in *People* magazine. Varmint would often go along with my experiments because he had fun sometimes and didn't usually get damaged.

Varmint blinked as he emerged from the house into the light. He always stayed inside, in the dark, unless I lured him out. I motioned him over to where I was standing, by one of the smaller holes. I had to be careful not to make him suspicious or scare him off.

"I want to see how easy it is to get out of these hole traps. Lay down on the ground, and I'll drop you in. You see how fast you can get out."

"Okay," he said.

I picked him up by his legs and lowered him into one of the little holes. I had to start him on something easy. He swung his legs around, and climbed right out.

"That was easy!" Of course it was easy. That's why I'd dropped him in that one first. But I didn't say anything.

"Okay, let's try this hole."

We went over to the wood chip hole. I picked him up by the legs again and dropped him in. This hole was deeper than he was tall. He vanished from sight. He kicked and squirmed, but all he

succeeded in doing was kicking wood chips from his feet down to bury his head. He was stuck good.

I was pleased. This was a fine hole, able to trap a big kid. I went inside for ten or fifteen minutes to get something to eat. When I came out, Varmint was nowhere to be seen. I had expected he would have gotten out in the time I was gone, but he was still in there. I kicked some wood chips in to see if filling the hole would cause him to emerge. He just yelled. I pulled him out before the neighbors heard him.

When he emerged, he was quite angry, despite the fact that I'd just rescued him. "You put me in a hole!" he shouted. His face was almost purple, and he waved his arms and jumped and yelled. I watched with interest, being sure to stay at a safe distance. He might have been red-faced because he was mad. Then again, he might have been red-faced because he'd been upside down for the previous fifteen minutes.

"Of course I put you in a hole, Varmint. That's what you came out here for. To test holes."

He looked puzzled for a minute, pondering the obvious truth of what I just said.

"Real Varmints live in holes. And a real Varmint wouldn't have gotten stuck like you did. You must be a retarded Varmint."

That was too much for him.

"I'm *not* a retarded Varmint!" And at that, Varmint started banging on me with little fists. I tried to jam him back in the hole but he ran off and started throwing sticks and rocks at me. I went in the house and locked the doors. I let him in when he calmed down.

The next day, I covered my holes with brown paper bags, which I then covered with dirt. I checked them daily to see if I had caught anything. I encouraged Varmint to try to trap some of his friends in the wood chip hole, but we never succeeded.

As summer turned into fall, my holes just sat there. Varmint had taken to driving his toy trucks in and out of the little holes, but he stayed clear of the big one. Halloween was coming, and I had an

idea. Back then, explosive flash powder was available for pennies from theatrical supply places. I would fill the holes with flash powder wired to detonators in my room. I would make my own war movie for trick-or-treaters, one in which they would be the stars. I needed more holes. It was time to put Varmint to work.

We were ready by the time Halloween rolled around.

That Halloween, Varmint stood in the doorway like a sweet child, luring trick-or-treaters in with his innocent smile. He enjoyed being the bait. As they walked up the path, they passed my flash-powder-filled holes. Each hole was wired to an extension cord that led to my room, from which I watched the whole spectacle. When the kids got close, I would plug in a cord, detonating the powder in one of my holes. There would be a hell of a flash and a roar. A fireball would rise into the sky, and dirt would fly everywhere. The kids would scream and scatter.

That year was one of our most economical candy years. Very few trick-or-treaters braved the blasts for a second run. We ate the candy ourselves the next day.

As I got older, my practical jokes grew more sophisticated. When I was fourteen, my guidance counselor said, "John, some of your tricks are sick. They are evil. They indicate deep-seated emotional problems." It was true that some of my pranks had taken on a nasty edge. My sadness at how other kids had treated me all my life had turned to anger. If I had not found electronics and music, I might well have come to a bad end. It was around this time that I came up with one prank that trumped all the others.

It was one hot summer night in the Shutesbury woods when the rural quiet ended abruptly. Everyone in my house was asleep as I opened my bedroom window and dropped to the ground. I carried a knife and a flashlight, though I didn't expect I'd need either one unless something went very wrong. I knew my way and I was prepared. I walked up the dirt road, ducking into the bushes any time the lights of a car approached. It was about a mile from my house to my destination—the power lines on Sand Hill Road.

Underneath the steel high-tension tower, a hundred yards back from the road, five one-gallon cans of paint were arranged in a pentagram. I'd carefully swept the area clear of leaves and debris, and I'd cut straight pieces of wood from the trees nearby for the lines of the pentagram. The cans marked the points. There was a five-gallon pail of roofing tar in the middle with a circle of stones around it. I had set them out that afternoon, and now I lit them. With all of them burning, thick and poisonous black smoke rose in a cloud that blotted out the stars above.

I had hoped the paints—oil-based stains, actually—would burn in different colors, but they all burned with the same dull yellow flames. I had stolen the paint cans from a construction site down the road and I hadn't had time to test-burn them. I wished I had some kerosene, too, to liven things up. Maybe even some gasoline. But it was too late for that. The paint would have to do.

It was a moonless night and the rising smoke made it even darker up in the tower. But the fires would be burning brighter soon, and then I knew my guests would be able to see. My guests, of course, had not yet arrived.

I had set up the whole scene in the dark. It had been hard work, especially climbing the tower. It was scary, being up there with seventy-five thousand volts only a few feet above my head. A quick move up there might have been fatal. I felt the electricity crackle once when I raised my arm and I slowly and carefully lowered it back down. Rigging the rope was the hardest part. It was a heavy pull for a fourteen-year-old. But I did it. No one saw me.

By eleven o'clock, there was no traffic at all. I hadn't seen a car pass in over an hour. I was ready.

The fires were brighter, and anyone approaching would be sure to see what I'd done. About ten feet above the pentagram, a body was hanging. It was dressed in old clothes, and the rope around its neck was tied to the crosstree of the electric tower, thirty feet above. I had practiced making hangman's nooses until I got it right. The one up on the tower was perfect, as anyone with a flashlight

could see. The feet had already turned black and greasy from the smoke and the blackness was trailing up the legs. Soon the whole body would be covered in disgusting oily black soot. The tar in the middle was bubbling now. The edges of the pots glowed dull red.

I'd adjusted the body's height carefully. Too high to recover from the ground, but low enough to see in the light of the fires. Overall, I was pleased.

Out at the road, a few hundred yards away, the fires were visible as a dim glow through the brush—not bright enough to attract attention. College students had campfires and all-night parties up there every weekend when school was in session.

But school wasn't in session, and this was no college party. It was time to call the authorities.

I walked out to the road. It was pitch-black. There were no houses for half a mile in either direction, and no street lights. Just a lonely dirt road. The only people within shouting distance were the dead ones in the cemetery down near the stream. I climbed the telephone pole on the street and clipped on the wires from my linesman's telephone, which I had looted along with some other supplies from a visiting phone truck a few months earlier.

I clipped onto the phone circuit for Mr. Ellis, one of my least favorite neighbors. Out there, the phone circuits ran on individual pieces of copper wire, strung from pole to pole. Our town had 273 residents as of the last census, and they didn't all have phones. If you're going to climb poles and clip onto wires in the dark, you need to know which ones carry phone signals and which carry electrical power. Otherwise, you can get fried.

I had a dial tone. Hanging from the pole by a strap made from two belts I'd stolen from my father, I dialed the state police, whose number I had memorized.

"StatePoliceThisLineIsBeingRecorded," the trooper said. "I'd like to report a hanging," I said, in my lowest and toughest voice.

"What?" That slowed him down.

"A ritual hanging. A person. On Sand Hill Road. From the power lines. Come see."

I unclipped the phone, climbed down, and retreated into the woods. *If they can trace the call, I said to myself, that jerk Ellis will get a visit tonight.* He had a kid, too, a snotty little brat. *Maybe they'll wake him up and ask him about this,* I thought. *Maybe they'll even arrest him.* I snickered at the thought.

I circled back through the stream, in case the visiting police had dogs. I felt at home in the woods after dark. My night vision was excellent, my hearing superb. I worked my way into a perch in a pine tree. From there, I had a panoramic view of the whole scene but I was far enough back in the trees that I was invisible, even if they shined lights. I could climb down silently, and I was high enough that casual searchers would pass under me if I needed to hide. I waited in the dark.

I used to be afraid of the dark, but I wasn't anymore. I used to fear barking dogs. I would cringe and say to myself, "Nice doggie please don't bite me I'll just go away," but by that night I could look at them and think, *I am your worst nightmare. Come closer and I will impale you upon my stick.* The more firmly I visualized it, the more the dogs believed it.

Now the tables had turned. Now the dogs feared me.

Fifteen minutes passed. Perhaps the police were far away. Perhaps they were napping. Finally, I saw headlights approaching. They had arrived. The wait was over.

The police car stopped in the road. The door opened and closed. There was only one trooper in the car. State troopers usually patrolled alone back then. I knew my fire would draw him in, like a moth to a flame. There was nothing else for him to see. There was only one power line, and my fire was the only light. It was burning even brighter now. The flickering light illuminated him as he walked on the path to the tower. He had his light in his hand. He aimed it up a bit. Above the fire, the body twisted gently in the smoke. The trooper stopped dead in his tracks.

"Sweet Jesus!" I heard him say.

He looked around, swinging his flashlight back and forth, searching for an attacker in the brush. He drew his gun, but there was nothing to shoot. In the movies, this was the moment when something big and black grabbed the trooper and dragged him screaming into the swamp. From the look of him, I was sure he'd seen those movies, too. I was very still, not wanting to be shot. There was no sound other than the chirps and creaks of the nighttime, and the occasional rustle of wind in the trees. He jumped and spun every time the trees rustled. There was no light except the flicker of the fires and the headlamps of the cruiser, up on the road. Suddenly, he holstered his gun, turned, and ran back to his cruiser. I heard the door open and shut.

I heard the click as he locked the doors. The blue light started flashing. He remained in his vehicle. I wasn't surprised. If I were him, all alone out there, I'd stay in my car, too, after seeing that. Police are supposed to be brave, but there are limits.

I heard the chatter on his radio but I could not make it out. I figured reinforcements were being called. Ten minutes passed. The fire got brighter. Two more cruisers arrived. They all got out of their cars. They talked. Everyone knows there is safety in numbers. Now they were brave.

"Where is he?"

The first trooper led the way. They walked down the power line road to the tower. They looked up.

"Sonofabitch!" one of the new troopers said.

"Wadda we do?"

"You climb up and cut him down."

"I'm not climbin' up and gettin' electrocuted."

"He ain't goin' nowhere. He's dead."

"Call the fire department."

"Call the electric company."

They shined lights around, looking for perpetrators. One trooper returned to his cruiser, presumably to call the fire depart-

ment and the power company. When he returned, he had the pump shotgun from his trunk. I'm sure it was loaded. But there was nothing to shoot. *There's no ambush tonight.* It was still quiet. More time passed. I was getting bored up in my tree.

They did not interfere with my burning pentagram. I wondered what they made of it. Was it devil worship? A lynching? An elaborate suicide? By now, the body was jet black from the soot, and it was starting to drip from the heat of the burning tar, which was bubbling in the pail. I was glad I had used tar. The drips and the foul black smoke kept the people back.

The fire department arrived. First came a single fire truck, then individual firemen in a ragtag collection of vehicles. Soon half a dozen cars and pickups clustered in the road, with red lights flashing.

The electric company crew arrived next, with a big yellow cherry picker truck. It had only taken one of me to hang my friend up in the tower, but it was going to take twenty of these people to get him down.

Now we had blue, red, and yellow lights all flashing. The road was blocked. Radios were cackling. If we had been in the city, there would have been a crowd gathered by now. They finally decided to put the fire out, but they acted as though it might be booby-trapped. The firemen seemed afraid to go near the paint cans. I guess the scene was unusual enough to be unsettling.

People continued shining flashlights into the grass around the tower, but there was no evidence to be found. I had made sure of that. I'd worn gloves, and all the materials had been scavenged or stolen. I hadn't bought anything that was up in the tower, and nothing was traceable to me. They couldn't get fingerprints off a tree. And they weren't going to catch me.

There were no fire hydrants on Sand Hill Road, but the fire truck had a water tank on board. They unrolled a hose and walked in the direction of the tower. I wondered why they didn't just drive there. Perhaps they'd blocked themselves in with all the cars

up at the road. From fifty feet back, the firemen turned the water on my fire. The hose jumped, and a blast of water hit the burning pots and scattered them. All of a sudden there was a big cloud of steam and a flash; burning paint and tar went flying. Now the grass was on fire, too. All those firemen standing around suddenly had something to do. For a moment, the body was forgotten. More hoses came out, and shovels, and foam, and soon the whole area was wet and dark. Firemen walked around in the dark, stomping out embers. It was hard to see the body now that the light had gone. One of the cops shined a light on it.

"Turn that light off! Don't you have any respect!"

The power line had been turned off. I could tell, because the faint crackle from the wires had stopped. There was no sound but the crickets. The power company truck bumped down the road to the tower. The driver stopped at its base, and put out his wheel chocks, just like he was on a highway. The ambulance followed him down, and they backed up to face the tower. Another power company truck lit the ground at the base of the tower with its headlights. The cherry picker on the first electric company truck started rising. The medics gathered at the base of the tower with a stretcher. It was time to recover the body.

"Ready down there?"

"Ready."

The lineman reached over and cut the rope. The body fell. The medics moved gingerly to pick it up. Suddenly, there was a shout, and the reverent mood changed.

"Hey!!!"

A few seconds later, I heard the disgusted yell, "It's a freakin' mannequin!"

"A department store dummy!"

"This whole thing is a joke!"

Smiling, I slipped out of my tree and into the woods. I headed for home quickly, in case anyone came to check on me. I hid my lineman's phone and dark clothes in the cemetery on the way

home. I climbed the board I had left leaning against the side of the house and crawled in through my bedroom window. Before I dropped inside, I kicked the board away and it fell among the high grass, car parts, and junk on the ground in front of the house. I slipped into bed and pretended to be asleep. Soon I was.

I had always known that someday I would find a use for that mannequin I saw in the Dumpster behind Mr. Walsh's clothing store. It had been hard getting him home and hiding him, but it had proved worth it.

The next day, I returned to the power line to get the mannequin. He was gone. I figured the police had taken him. There was no sign of the previous night's excitement except a burned spot in the grass near the tower and some empty charred paint cans on the ground. The tar had soaked into the dirt in the middle of the stones, and my sticks were scattered about. I wished I could tell someone about my adventure. I had few friends, and I couldn't tell my brother, because he was only six and had no sense. He would probably rat me out to some other little animal's mother. I didn't say anything about the incident to anyone for a long time.

A few days later my mother took me to the airport for my annual trip to visit my grandparents in Georgia. It was just as well that I'd be in Georgia in case the cops came around, asking about the mannequin.