Grieving Las Vegas

October 3, 2017 By Shawn Decker

The airport was quiet. My partner, Gwenn, and I were leaving Las Vegas on a Monday, always preferable to the chaos of a Sunday departure when everyone is heading back home to the normalcy of their everyday lives. But the stillness of yesterday's trip was different. The notoriously tight slot machines were on but set to silent. The distractions of Las Vegas replaced by the collective grieving for the lives lost from the previous night, the lives that still hung in the balance and the lives of loved ones forever changed.

We left Charlottesville on a Thurday at 3:30 pm. It's a wonderful time to go, because you get to have your regular day at home, then you arrive in Las Vegas at 8:30 pm, gaining the three hours in the time zone change. Basically, in a town that offers odds that always favor the house, I always arrive feeling like I beat Vegas in a game that can't be regulated...

The Vegas plan? To see my favorite band, Depeche Mode, who were playing on Saturday night. To make things better, two of our best friends, Josh and Jenny, were coming in from Los Angeles to spend the weekend with us. And from Thursday to Sunday night, it was the typical Vegas experience highlighted by an incredible performance by Depeche Mode that had me teary-eyed and thankful for not only my against-the-odds survival of a 1987 HIV diagnosis, but the band's survival as well. Particularly Dave Gahan, who triumphed over addiction in the 1990's. On Saturday night there he was, singing and sounding better than ever, and there I was in the audience on effective treatment... living a life that was hard to imagine when I was a 13 year-old, two years into my diagnosis, discovering Depeche Mode's music for the first time.

On Sunday night I was drinking a bit more than someone in their 40s should before a travel day, but there was much to celebrate. And it was a relief to be away from Charlottesville, my beloved hometown that is now known for hosting a national tragedy. The ripple effect of that August day's events are still being felt by the people who live here, and will be for a long time to come.

Gwenn and our friends were playing our favorite game- a silly, cheap $5 Playboy bunnies hosted video Blackjack machine- Josh and I went to the bar to order another drink. On the TV behind the bar there was a headline, something to the effect of "Active Shooter Situation in Las Vegas". The tragic news was live, and it was happening about two miles down the Strip from The Mirage, where we were hanging out. Back at the Blackjack table, Gwenn had received a text from one of our friends in Charlottesville that read: "Are you okay?" Gwenn looked up the news, when Josh and I returned we let them know that we'd also gotten the word about what was going on. Gwenn excused herself to go to the restroom and I sat down beside Jenny.

Then we heard, “Run! RUN!” A large group of people darted through the casino, with everyone else following suit, dealers, waitresses, bar staff. I have a bad ankle, so instead of running I just dropped to the ground, playing dead as people ran by. When the Virginia Tech shooting happened, I devised a play possum strategy in active shooter situations that I never thought I’d have to employ. Jenny and Josh ran off: Josh thought I was behind him- in the time it took him to turn and locate me, he lost sight of Jenny who hid under a table. Like Josh did with me, Jenny probably thought Josh was right behind her. I laid on the ground until someone tapped my foot and told me it was okay to get up. I never heard any sound of gunfire or violent chaos once the casino floor had cleared out, so I stood up with a tiny sense of relief and made my way to the women’s bathroom.

I entered, calling out for Gwenn, who responded from around the corner: she was in a stall with two women, huddled up. Gwenn and I shared a long embrace. Jenny and Josh had reunited and were in a stranger’s hotel room on the 9th floor. Someone else came into the bathroom looking for their partner, saying that they thought it was okay to leave. I went out to take a look and the entire floor was pretty much empty. I approached a hotel employee who looked like they were in shock. I tried to speak to a second employee who had no real information as to whether or not it was safe, so I started to go back to the bathroom which seemed a thousand times safer than a wide open casino.

“Don’t go in there!” “Don’t go in there!”

The voice screamed louder as I picked up my pace and entered the women’s bathroom. I returned to the stall, scared, and told Gwenn and the two women that we should stay there in there. The older, male employee called for us to come out. They were trying to clear out that first floor entirely. When we emerged, the guy was pissed at me.

“Why did you ignore me when I said not to go in there?!”

“Because I had just talked to two employees that were shitting their pants!!”

Understandably, we both had a hard time getting our information across, but thankfully we quickly calmed down, our weary eyes meeting in a quiet apology that ended with a soft touch on the arm.

While in the stall, Gwenn had been texting with Jenny, who was reunited with Josh. They were on the 9th floor in a stranger’s room. The employee escorted us to the elevators, and Gwenn and the two women we’d shared a stall with got in. Once we got the 9th floor, we saw two men sitting on a bench. We spoke briefly- they had as little information about what was actually happening in The Mirage as we did, but looked just as shaken up by the chaotic scene. I invited them to come with us. Our large, ad hoc group of mostly strangers sat on the double beds, or stood, and watched the news together. I had my hand on a stranger’s knee in an attempt to calm them, Jenny had her hand on my knee. We didn’t have any information on what happened nine floors below, but we were all seeing the scope of what had set the terror off.

It was around midnight.

I don’t recall where the information came from, but someone had gotten word that it was safe to go back downstairs. When we stepped off the elevator and walked into the casino, waitresses had their service trays filled with bottles of water, which they were giving out to anyone within arm’s reach. Gwenn exchanged numbers with the people she’d shared that stall with- they were in town for a wedding. They were staying at the Mandalay Bay, which wasn’t allowing anyone in, so they decided to stay at The Mirage.

No one was allowed to exit through the front door of the casino, which faces Las Vegas Blvd, so we made our way to another exit. No cabs were present, we were told that it was safe to walk back to our casino, The Cosmopolitan, before we were told, “I wouldn’t do that.” A man sitting near us said he’d called an Uber. It rolled up, he got it, and we decided to do the same. On the way out there tons of armed police and flashing lights. The driver was informed to stay out of certain lanes on the Blvd., but that it was okay to take us to our hotel. On the way, side streets were closed, a mini-tank sat on one with what appeared to be a sniper in it. The Cosmo is halfway between the Mandalay Bay and The Mirage. Once we arrived at the Cosmo, the usual entrance was blocked off to cars. Las Vegas Blvd was closed, our hotel was literally the last one you could get to by car. The side street was lined with police cars. Our driver let us out on the street and we walked up to the doors of the Cosmo, where someone checked to make sure we had a room key before letting us enter.

Once inside, some of the familiar sounds of Las Vegas greeted us. There were a few people playing slot machines, time can disappear in Las Vegas, and I bet some of them didn’t even know what was going on yet. Josh and Jenny were staying in a different tower than us, but we all went back to our room; there was still so much comfort in being reunited. We turned on the news, and once again the scope of the tragedy had widened.

The next day Josh and Jenny drove us to the airport. We could see the Mandalay Bay in the distance, and the two windows the shooter had busted out. The crime scene eventually disappeared from view.

I had expired my gambling budget- which I consider entertainment money- but in the end I lucked out. My friends and I had experienced what had amounted to a fire drill. If I listened to country music, like most of the people who were born in Waynesboro, Virginia, and not electronic music, I would have been at a different concert that weekend. My heart goes out to all of those who were affected by the shootings, people who went to Las Vegas to have fun and ended up losing something that they didn’t even know there were gambling with: the normalcy of returning home.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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