



LOTUS-RENAULT E20 AT PAUL RICARD

FINAL FANTASY

This isn't happening to me, and other curious emotions experienced while driving a Formula 1 car at the Paul Ricard Circuit

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*All the people I'll never be,
all the things I'll never do,
all the dreams I'll always dream,
though they have no reason to come true.*

I'm not sure why these lines are stuck in my head. I know the verse isn't particularly good, but I suppose it's the closest that I can come to describing why it is that I am completely and utterly overwhelmed. I've always believed in dreaming, in wishing for things, and in pursuing those dreams and wishes relentlessly. But this? This is more than I ever could have imagined. Things like *this* don't happen in real life. Things like this aren't *meant* to happen in real life. Maybe this is why I've been

reduced to a blubbing fool, with a steady stream of tears pouring down both cheeks. And at this point I have just one wish - I wish to not open my helmet. I don't want an entire pit garage full of people to see me crying.

"Magazines," the tall, affable-looking chap standing before me snorts. It's a bright morning at the Winfield Racing facility at the Paul Ricard Circuit. And we've just been divided up into groups. There's Abhay and me, two of the three Indian journalists who've been invited to drive the Lotus-Renault E20 F1 car that was raced in the 2012 season of Formula 1. Then there's Wouter, who probably

didn't mean to snort derisively when he spat the word 'magazines' out into the air. He's all smiles as he tells us that he's just a private person who always wanted to drive a Formula 1 car, so he decided he'd best get on with it, and bought himself a spot on the Winfield-Renault programme. It's hard for me to say anything at this point because I know that I'm on an extremely generous invite from Renault India to participate in this event. Unlike Wouter, I haven't spent a sizeable amount of my savings on this. So I smile and nod. And I suppose I look suitably sheepish.

What I actually want to do, is jump up and down and yell into Wouter's face that I've always wanted to drive a Formula 1 car too. But that this was one

dream that I thought was so impossible that I didn't dare vocalise it or tell people about it. Sure, growing up I'd tell people that I wanted to become a motorsport journalist. That I'd someday interview Michael Schumacher. In my head, that seemed achievable. After all, if I was a motorsport journalist, and I tried hard enough to get an interview with Michael Schumacher, it *must* be possible. But me drive an F1 car? You must be joking! You must be mental! You must see pigs flying through the sky on a regular basis! I want to ask Wouter whether he's maintained a scrapbook of newspaper clippings to keep track of Formula 1 races over the years. Whether he's got a race report notebook where he scribbled report after report after every qualifying session and every race to practice for the future. To be ready when the call came through. When someday I'd work for a publication that would allow

me to cover motorsport. But I don't. "Magazines," I hear myself thinking. And all of a sudden, I feel completely and utterly undeserving.

I'm being strapped into the Formula 1 car for a seat fitting. The mechanics put some extra cushioning underneath me to try and get me a little closer to the pedals, but to also make sure that I'm able to see above the nose cone of the car. This is beginning to feel a little too real, a little too quickly. I should have eaten breakfast, I think to myself. On the other hand, if I'd eaten breakfast, I'd probably be throwing up in a corner somewhere. I'm actually that frightened. I mean I've only ever driven properly on a racetrack twice. Well, thrice if I count the sessions we've just done in the F4 Mygale-Renault. And the next machine I get to drive on

a racetrack is going to be a Formula 1 car. How is that possible? My thoughts are interrupted by the mechanic telling me to push down as hard as I can with my left foot. He wants to check the force that I'm able to apply on the brake pedal. I gather up every ounce of energy I have, I screw my face up, and I push down on what feels like an immovable brick. "You're going to have to push harder," he says to me. I wish there wasn't a steering column between my two feet. My right foot might possibly be better at this. And we've completed a series of exercises with the Winfield Racing physiotherapist, Sarah, who comes to the conclusion that for some reason I use the right side of my body a lot more than my left. Stupid useless left foot, I think to myself. But I try again. The brake pedal still feels like a brick. "Better," the mechanic says to me. "You're going to have to remember to push that hard when you want to

slow this car down, okay?" he says. I nod. What else can I do?

I'm at the bottom of my class. I don't like being at the bottom of my class, but I find that I am most definitely at the bottom of my class. I'm beginning to think that they're going to take my helmet and racing gloves away from me, and present me with a dunce cap instead. We've completed three twenty-minute sessions in the Formula 4 car already. And we're with a Winfield Race engineer, analysing our telemetry. Abhay has done well. But Wouter, who has dazzled us all thus far with his wit, humour, and ability to produce an anecdote in every situation that day, has come out at the top of the class. And he's never driven on a racetrack ever before. I've got one lap that I can be proud of, is what I feel. See, Abhay's got a lot more driving time, a lot

more driving skill, and a whole lot more courage than I have. His best lap in the F4 car is 1min 54sec. I've managed, on one lap and one lap alone, 1min 58sec. The engineer looks completely and utterly disgusted with me. He's not even smiling to try and soften the blow, as he points out that I have had only one genuinely good lap. I need to be better. I need to brake harder. Much harder. It's almost as if I'm afraid to brake, he says to me. I nod. What I want to say is that I've been braking as hard as was humanly possible for me to brake! That I've been braking so hard that my knee hurts. But instead I just nod. I even nod as he tells me that if I brake so lightly in the Formula 1 car he's going to have to ask me to stop the car. I can't blame him. He's just doing his job. And I can imagine the last thing they want is some throttle happy guest who thinks she's the bees knees to go crash one of their machines and ruin the day for everyone. My one saving grace is

that Wouter the Wonderful is also being chided for not braking somewhere before the Chicane Sud, if I'm not mistaken. But where I meekly nodded, Wouter has a response. "It feels counter-intuitive for me to brake there, really!" he says to the engineer. "I've been accelerating there!" he continues. Well, he must be doing something right because he's set the fastest lap times of us all.

I'm being strapped into the F1 car. The mechanic who is doing up my harness seems sympathetic. I ask if I can press the brake pedal once to check and see if my left foot can handle it. It still feels like a brick that isn't moving at all. "Don't worry, even if you can't feel it moving, it'll slow the car down," he says to me. "And there'll be someone on the radio with you the whole time," he says encouragingly. Then it's time. The engine is switched on, I'm rolled out of the pit garage, and Cyrille, who is the race engineer on the radio with me tells me to put the car into first gear. Once I've raised the revs enough, he tells me to let out the clutch with my fingers slowly, and suddenly I'm off. Rolling down the pitlane in first gear. Then he says to move up to second, and I shift a gear higher. And then after taking the first turn, and as I'm approaching the second turn, he tells me to accelerate more so that I don't overheat the engine. Cyrille is the nice engineer, not the man who was disappointed in just how terrible I was. And so I do as I'm told. It feels surreal. It's too loud, the steering wheel is strangely light after having to muscle that F4 car around the whole time, and I can just about see a little bit of the nose cone and the very large wheels of the car. When I approach the back straight, Cyrille's voice comes over the radio saying "Accelerate please, now you have a straight, accelerate!" And so I do. It's terrifying to be honest, and I know I'm probably only at 20 or 30 per cent of the throttle. But it's still faster than I ever thought it would be. It's possibly the noise that the 750PS 2.8-litre V8 engine is making in the back. It makes me feel like I'm going faster than I think I am. But anyhow, I don't want to reach a corner and find that my left foot can't stop the car in time. So I play it a lot safer than I should. What I can tell you though, is this. Three laps go by very, very quickly in a Formula 1 car, even when you're not going very fast. And I can also tell



Heading down the main straight at Paul Ricard in the Lotus-Renault E20 - never thought this day would come. The fear you see in my eyes as I sit in the F4 car is very real. Multiply that by 100 and you'll know what I felt in the F1 machine. Instructor Luke Kidsley analysing Abhay's telemetry data



you this, that I have one clear memory from a day that is more or less a blur. I'm going through the Signe corner, my eyes are taking in what seems like on board footage from a racecar, and there's even sun glinting in the corner of my visor, and at that exact moment I find myself thinking "You're driving a Formula 1 car, which is pretty ridiculous."

I'm hiding in a bathroom at the Paul Ricard circuit having a good cry. I need to get it out of my system. I need to do be allowed to let all the waterworks out without people looking at me. See, I'd driven back into the pitlane, heard Cyrille tell me to put the car into neutral, and come to a complete stop. So I do. A mechanic reaches into the car and hits the kill switch. The engine stops. And all of a sudden this beast that's been shuddering and snorting is silent, calm, cocoon-like. I want to stay in here and take a nap in the comforting cockpit of a Formula 1 car. Maybe this is the chassis that Kimi Raikkonen used in 2012, I think to myself, seeing as he was the one famous for taking naps. But then Cyrille asks me "How was

it?" And I give him a double thumbs up and proceed to burst into tears in my helmet. And I decide not to open my visor. But then another one of our instructors comes up to the car, opens my visor, and sees the tears pouring down my face. "It's very emotional," I manage to mumble. Then I run to find a quiet place to cry.

I've got tears streaming down my face even as I'm typing this out. I know it's silly. Because I'm the person that went slow in a Formula 1 car. In fact I've taken forever to write this story because more than being afraid to drive the F1 car, I'm afraid to tell this story. Because I know that that's what I'll be in the eyes of most people. Someone who happens to work at a car magazine, who got lucky enough to drive an F1 car. Someone who doesn't deserve this as much as all those other people who dreamt of driving an F1 car, who dreamt of racing in Formula 1, who worked so hard, who came so close, but who didn't quite make it. "Magazines," I still find myself thinking.

Yes, I am completely and utterly undeserving. 🙄



SECOND OPINION

Driving an F1 car sounds glamorous but calls for a lot of physical and mental effort. And a major concern was whether I'll fit in it or not, but I did! We had a packed schedule – briefings, physio sessions, track sessions in the Formula 4 car and telemetry. And the Batak test was fun! F4 sessions served as a good primer but when the moment arrived, I was intimidated. I was about to jump into a 750PS, V8-engined F1 car – a multi-million dollar prototype – from a 160PS single-seater. I could barely breathe with the harnesses. I felt like a true F1 driver as the engine was fired up, I was wheeled out and the engineer's voice crackled into the radio's earpiece. I feathered the clutch with my finger gingerly and rolled out. I barely had room to steer. Got to the back straight and floored the ultra-responsive throttle carefully. The engine got to 18,000rpm in a blink, lights on the steering flashed furiously, the radio beeped in my ears calling for an upshift. Gear changes were brutal as gunshots. Guess I didn't stop grinning after that. Ultra-responsive steering, manic acceleration, unreal grip levels and downforce and the best gearbox I've ever flicked through. My three laps passed in a blur. But, it was a lot easier than I'd anticipated! I've driven 750PS sportscars on track, but – I mean it – nothing compares to an F1 car. The engineering, sheer performance and single-minded focus on going fast makes it ultra-special. Pure. Unadulterated. One of the best days of my life? You bet!

Abhay Verma

