

Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information

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Publication date: March 2000

Publisher Id: jgi.2000.1.2

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2000.1.2

At Greenwood Racetrack

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(written in 1996)

We hope that the narratives in *First Person Accounts* will evoke an understanding of how people experience gambling. These experiences may come from gamblers, from family or friends of gamblers, and may be positive or negative. We invite others to share their experiences as *First Person Accounts* or to a dialogue in our Letters to the Editor.

During the summer of '93, I occasionally talked my mother into going with me to Greenwood Racetrack in Toronto. It wasn't her favourite place, nor was it the favourite place of most of the people I knew. My daughter refused to go there "amongst the scumbags," as she so aptly put it, but it was my weekend recreation. To escape from dwelling on things of the past, which left me empty and broken, I would rush off on Friday or Saturday or both nights to spend money I didn't have, but which my bank overdraft could accommodate. A quick trip to the Green Machine and I was literally off to the races.

When my daughter moved out the first time, the support from my former husband was cut in half and my finances began to worsen. As I tried to make sense of my state of affairs, I looked back to my first gambling experience and totalled up the years: ten years of chasing a myth and living one. I had a secret life that I exposed to few people, certainly not to the people I worked with. And of course, I gave up my friends - they would not learn of my unhappy penchant for losing money.

A psychic thing I had occasionally experienced resurfaced one summer night in Guelph, where I lived in 1980. A lower downtown street in Guelph had been closed off and a carnival set up. My husband, my daughter and I went - an affluent family secure with themselves.

As the evening progressed, the fair seemed to come into focus, unreal, and yet somehow, heightened. It was a strange experience, almost like being in a car accident when every detail is slowed down and in horror and helplessness you know you are mortal.

I shrugged off that experience, but it foretold a fascination with what was to come. Sometime after this experience, the three of us moved to Montreal. Within two months of this move, my marriage was over and my daughter and I wound up in Toronto, more aware of each other than we had ever been. In one evening, I celebrated my wedding anniversary and ended my marriage, all while eating dinner at Ruby Foo's.

It was March of '82 when we left Montreal at my husband's invitation. The train route to Toronto ended at Union Station and from there we rode the subway to Kennedy station. With our two suitcases in tow, we walked to my mother's apartment, which she shared with my dear stepfather.

I had originally intended to return to Guelph. But Mom and my stepfather talked me into staying at their Toronto apartment with my daughter, where I slept on the pullout bed in their spare room.

It was tough trying to secure an apartment, and I played the waiting game for a home of our own. I worked temporarily while I waited. I had \$10,000 in the bank and was somewhat financially secure. I held off getting a permanent job until I was settled in my own place and had my furniture and possessions with me in Toronto.

I found an apartment, and my stepfather, who never let me down, saw that my furniture was delivered. I then applied for a job with a bank and after weeks of their deliberating, I was offered a permanent position. My life seemed to be settling down.

My daughter and I went to the Canadian National Exhibition on Labour Day weekend, and I was to start work the following Monday. We walked through the CNE and I don't really remember all the details, but I began to play the games of chance. It was fun. In fact, as closing time came my daughter and I were all smiles, thrilled to have enjoyed ourselves for the first time since we left Montreal.

After that I lived for the CNE, and began buying \$2 instant scratch-and-win tickets. I was consumed. One of the early scratch-and-win tickets also had a number for a future draw with a prize of \$100,000. I eagerly kept all these tickets in anticipation of the future draw. One day I counted them up, I had over \$200 in useless tickets. I began to realize that something was wrong. I searched for the number of Gamblers Anonymous and hesitatingly called. That night, unlike the other nights I called, someone answered.

I told him that I thought I might have a gambling problem, and that I had been buying lottery tickets. The reformed gambler on the other end of the phone scoffed at me and said buying a few lottery tickets was not gambling. He had gone to the track for years and *that* was real gambling. I told him I had bought more than a few

tickets, but he was not impressed. Not being at all forceful, I hung up. I decided that I would try the racetrack and that weekend - fearful, but drawn to it, I made my way to Greenwood Racetrack.

It was overwhelming to a novice: noise, crowds and strange odds, which I would later become a master at, showing displayed on television screens beside the horses' numbers.

Thoroughbred horses were running that day, and asking help from a ticket seller, I made my first bet. The horse won and I lined up to cash my \$5 winning ticket.

I asked a man in line ahead of me, obviously also a winner, how much I had won. He said the horse had been at 4 to 5 odds and I would get back \$9. I was disappointed. The man showed me his winning ticket: a \$100 bet. I wasn't so much impressed as in wonder at someone risking so much money when the payoff was so small. Obviously, he was adept at playing "sure things": the bane of all gamblers.

I made some other bets, but finally I made two or three at once; one of which was a show bet on a horse going off at 20 to 1 odds. I was learning about odds quickly. I went to put my tickets in my wallet and I couldn't find it. Frantically, I dug around in my purse. Of course I couldn't have lost my wallet, I told myself, but my search was fruitless. I was in a panic.

I retraced my steps, but my wallet with \$17 in it and my means of getting home were gone. The track was a long way from where I lived. No one knew that I had actually come to a place like this alone. How would I get home and explain my shame, not only at having gone, but also at being the victim of a pickpocket.

A prickle of fear was all over my body, but I calmed myself and hoped that maybe one of my horses would win. Having nothing better to do, I nervously watched the race. My 20 to 1 long shot came home. I cashed the winning ticket and got back \$6, enough to get home and back to real life.

I left the track sobered by my experience. But I would return to that haven of shame and compulsion many times in the years that followed and walk a tightrope of living a dual identity.

In a way, I would remain true to my nature and not be dishonest or cheat anyone involving a money transaction for the sake of gambling. But to myself, I heaped lies onto lies and my self honesty was diminished. Thus what I *was* changed forever. Changed too, was how I would look at the people who passed through my life. I regarded the addicted as fellow travellers for whom, at times, I would share an unspoken empathy that did not always produce sympathy. The unaddicted became God's chosen; just normal folks, but sometimes within me I wondered if they too

harboured a secret self. I regarded anyone with a forced smile or show of gaiety with suspicion.

The compulsion to gamble took a firmer grip on me. I left reason and reality behind on the nights when I discovered that I had inadvertently brought my banking card. One night when I discovered the card, I made a frantic trip to the automatic teller to withdraw money and then raced to the betting window just in time to make a huge bet. It never mattered if I won or lost; though I usually lost. Winning just kept me in the grip and atmosphere of the racetrack, but I always left with nothing in my pocket. I would trudge out and wait by the bus stop at the Harvey's.

Sometimes, but only sometimes, I had the \$1.60 to purchase one of Harvey's wonderful chocolate milkshakes and I enjoyed the reality and treat of it as I entered the real world and shook off the horror and hopelessness of the madness. The many trips I made to the banking machine drained my account, even with my overdraft, and I would steel myself to survive until my next paycheque.

As the bus moved through the darkness, I would look out the window and dwell on how secure the homeowners were, but I knew that such a luxury as a house of my own could never be mine.

Once, when the bus stopped for a light at Greenwood and Danforth, I looked up to the top window of the bank. Perched on the window ledge was a lone pigeon, which huddled on the ledge with its feathers ruffled outward, the small head turned around and buried into its back feathers as it sought shelter from the bitter night cold, and I wondered in whose grip we both were held.

Then a series of events came out of reading horoscopes, an amusing pastime for some. My sister, who was also born under the sign of Libra as I was, played a game with me during our evening telephone calls.

We speculated for what we read made us believe that soon the heavens would be with us. We found a new horoscope that forecast hope and promises for us both. I took special meaning from a forecast that urged me to look into a relationship from far back in my past and deal with it, for there I would find the key. I remembered a love I had encountered when I was 17 and the great dysfunctioning that had begun for me with that love. I began to explore my early past and how I was still living with it.

I continued to go to the racetrack, but I carried a memory of someone I had loved, now dead. My betting frenzy increased and my feet dragged with the sheer hopelessness of it all. Then one night my gambling frenzy peaked as I sat in the smoking room, hanging my hopes on the outcome of the televised races. I bargained with God that he should let me win one time and secure enough money

to walk away forever from that place and go no more. I kept making trips to the banking machine, buying more and more vouchers, only to lose.

I was in more of a fever that night than ever before. As I frantically purchased my last voucher, I believed I heard the ticket sellers talking about me, but I made a bet and sat at a table to watch the outcome of the race. The force of my need to win was so great that I called upon Heaven to let me win as a sign that I could walk away. Heaven answered with silence and I lost the race. But I got up and walked away feeling that something had left me.

In the weeks that followed I went no more to Greenwood. I told those who loved me and who grieved over my compulsion that it was gone. What took hold of me was a thirst for the beauty and caring of life - the small joys. I began to have money in my pocket and was now able to purchase the little things I had learned from gambling to do without. I looked to a future when I would have enough money to buy more expensive items.

This metamorphosis had not begun just with the horoscope. With my sister's help, encouragement and sympathy, we talked and I exposed the true horror of the gambling and my helplessness. Many factors all came together. In the end, I was someone who cared about smiling at people and listening to them. However, because of my nature I still cared too much about everything else, but not myself.

I took myself back to age 17, when my odyssey had began and then arrived at 50, still the same person. I lived the filling of those years trying to deal with the disapproval the world had heaped on me when I was 17. I sought safety in marriage and created a child. My reality for many years was to put my heart and soul into being a dutiful wife, but all that I offered my husband was rejected and I began gambling. I heaped scorn and abuse on myself by gambling, but within I knew I had been true to myself. I never stole or cheated to gamble, and if I borrowed money, I always paid it back.

I was 50 and my future was to learn to find small joys and the perks of life. I bolstered myself with daydreams of a man I once loved and a sometime belief that we could be together. Perhaps true heaven, even on earth, is the ability to dream dreams.

Our mood of the moment is how we look to our end. The gamble of life and the chances we deal with are our reality. In despair we want oblivion, but if we have ever achieved the brass ring, we cling to the pleasures of life and want more.

At 50 years of age, I cared again. I never made a mark on the world, save for those who loved me and those with whom I dealt fairly. I wondered sometimes if I even wanted to go 'round on the go' round of life yet another time, if I had the chance. I

was not certain if I wanted to go.

I took better care of myself and I laughed more; I gained my daughter's respect and I functioned and went to work everyday. I had money in my pocket and most days I lived in the reality of the world. I had come to terms with life.

But someday, if you feel a hollowness or if you're in a place and it sparks an echo within - you know - they call it deja whatchamacallit, then remember this tale and think of me. If you listen closely, you may hear me laughing as I go around again with a certain someone, reaching for the brass ring.



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