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Excerpts from Losing Mariposa: A Memoir of a Compulsive Gambler

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*(This article prints out to approximately 12 pages.)**This account was not peer-reviewed.*

Doug Little now lives and works in Ottawa where he is the Marketing and Communications Manager of the Canadian Tulip Festival. October 22, 2001, marked five years since he last gambled. *Losing Mariposa* will be published in 2002 by ECW Press.

[All names are pseudonyms except for those of the author's family.

—Ed.]

The first time I went to Windsor was, ostensibly, to get a job. I had applied to be executive director of the downtown Windsor business association. In reality, I went to gamble. It was the fall of 1995. I had quit bingo in June, but after a summer of all work and no gambling, I was ready to escape. Big time! A geographic cure had its appeal. Maybe it was because I couldn't wait for the casino in Orillia to open.

I knew I was burned out, but what could I do about it? Along with all of the other stuff I did for my 80-hour-a-week job and the festivals that summer, I also served as Orillia's representative on the official opening ceremonies committee for the new \$100-million Ontario Provincial Police General Headquarters. I was also on the steering committee of a \$150,000 regional tourism study, largely overhauling an organization that I once managed. Although there were rumours, it was a little-known secret that I resigned from that position in the mid-1980s because I had been borrowing from office cash. Then I was paying for Melanie's figure skating and chasing another kind of dreamworld.

In order to maintain my control and to hide things I was doing now, I couldn't say "no" when anyone asked me to serve on committees or take on new responsibilities. I couldn't say "no" and I couldn't unload any of my responsibilities.

My job, the festivals, Winter Carnival, and even Canada Day were all wrapped up together; first in my need to prove myself and then in my need to hide what I was doing with the money.

A new job and a new town, not to mention a new casino, were attractive. The plan was to kill two birds with one stone. Do the interview and win enough money to get these accounts under control. That was my goal at Casino Windsor: \$1,200 and some hot luck. Then I'd be free to do whatever I wanted, even move to Windsor.

Casino Windsor, the Government of Ontario's first casino, opened in 1994. By all accounts I'd heard, it was a raving success. Downtown Windsor was looking to share in the benefits and wanted a new manager. I was asked to come to Windsor for an interview. It was a five-hour trip and although I was driving a van, it seemed like I flew.

One thing that puzzled me was the lack of billboards or road signs announcing Casino Windsor along Highway 401 from Toronto. Even within the city, directional signs were lacking. I guessed I was coming from the wrong direction to catch the casino's target marketing. It must have all been aimed across the river at Detroit, from which, I bet, the directions were exact. Attracting American gamblers and U.S. dollars was a key rationale for establishing this first casino in the border city of Windsor. Money in. Problems out. Orillia was being sold its casino on a similar basis: increasing tourism by attracting Toronto and other southern Ontario residents who would come to gamble, but also stay and shop. Less than five per cent of Casino Rama's revenue would come from the local market. Money in. Problems out. I just happened to be part of the local percentage that couldn't wait.

I tried doubling back from the U.S. border and found my way past the casino's twinkling front lights with ease. While my heart raced at the sight, I was stoic in my patience. I had two hours. First, I wanted to find the location of the agency where the interview was to take place at two o'clock. This way I would know exactly where I had to go, how long it would take from the casino and exactly how long I had to gamble. Surprisingly I was able to park right next to the casino.

Where were the thousands of cars and jammed parking lots we kept hearing about in Orillia? It reminded me of the other big casino I'd been to in April, in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. There, we had to take the worst, most convoluted back roads into the middle of nowhere. The Sault casino was made up of a menagerie of buildings built like a mining town, in both haste and hesitation, not spending much money just in case it didn't last. Only the flashy Kewadin Vegas sign met my expectations of gambling paradise. However, you could park at the door, at least during the April weekends when I was there every night for four nights during that Festivals Ontario conference. And there were no traffic jams.

Casino Windsor was also stuffed into an unimpressive building, its temporary site in an old art gallery. However, its flashy, lighted facade was more reminiscent of the Las Vegas from movies I had seen, and the heat of my excitement climbed as I walked through the doors. Inside it was a palace, three floors of glitter and neon — all the bells and whistles to literally set my heart fluttering. There was even a non-smoking floor. Two hours, I reminded myself, as I dashed around the building like the proverbial kid in a candy store with a pocketful of money from his mother's purse.

I had been learning blackjack on the computer and working on a system for roulette, my first love in gambling. But just like my first casino visit at Kewadin, I couldn't get past the slot machines. The ding-ding-ding and clink-clink-clink of winning coins dropping, the spinning reels, the siren sounds and flashing lights of jackpot winners enthralled me as I wandered up and down the aisles looking for my machine. From my April visit in Kewadin I knew my favourites: the ones with Haywire icons and crazy action, where the reels go erratic, spinning out of control, racking up bonus winning credits. I couldn't find any as I sped around the casino looking from side to side, floor to floor. Maybe it was an American thing. I also couldn't waste any more precious gambling time.

I settled on the non-smoking floor, a nod to the sensitivity of my nose. Before I even started I was flushed, sweating and hyperactive. I could feel my blood boiling. I passed the next hour and forty-five minutes among these rows of slots.

I bought five \$20 rolls of dollar tokens and five \$10 quarter rolls from the coin change cart as soon as I hit the floor. Clang! I whacked a roll of tokens against the side of the coin tray at the bottom of the slot machine and flipped the tokens out of the paper wrapper into the coin tray. With a crescendo of clinks and clanks, they bounced around and then settled. I deftly swooped a handful from the tray and dropped three coins in rapid succession. Click! Click! Click! If they went too fast one coin fell all the way through and I had to swoop down again, grab another token and reload. It was a precision I learned at Kewadin, and now, it seemed like second nature. The next move was to push the maximum button to play the three-coin maximum. Then I pulled the lever on the right side to crank it down and start the wheels spinning.

Whirl, whirl, whirl. Ka-chunk. One wheel stopped. Bar. Ka-chunk. Second wheel. Two bars. My heart raced, my mind blurred. Ka-chunk. Three bars. I won. I tried to keep myself cool, to keep from dancing in the aisles and making a fool out of myself. Clink, clink, clink, the coins dropped into the waiting tray, clinking on my coins that were already there.

I looked quickly to the top of the slot machine at the payout menu. Three single bars: \$20. Three double bars: \$40. Three triple bars: \$60. I couldn't figure what I'd

won until the clinking stopped and the flashing LED showed \$20.

Swoop. Three more coins in. I cranked the arm and stopped breathing again as the reels spun hypnotically before my eyes. I glanced up to the menu to try to catch the various payouts without having to focus, not daring to take my concentration off the spinning wheels.

I was convinced that you have to see the reel stop in order to make it stop where you want. Ka-chunk. Right wheel. Three bars. My heart beat faster. My hand massaged the sides of the machine. "Come on," I whispered. Ka-chunk. Left wheel. Three bars. My heart was in my throat. I held my breath. "Come on baby." Ka-chunk. Three bars. "Yes!" I hollered. No. It was on the line. No clink, clink, clink. I looked over the winning menu. Close, but no cigar. Close. Next time. I could feel it. This machine was hot. It wanted to pay.

Swoop. Click. Click. Click. Whack the maximum button and crank the lever. No, you should have tried the button, just to change things. The reels spun. I needed to calm down. You can't expect to win every pull. Relax. I looked over at an elderly woman leaning from her stool in front of one machine to slap the buttons on the adjacent machine. Wow! She was playing two machines at once. She reminded me of the women at bingo who could play 24 cards on the regular games and then 36 for the jackpot game.

Ka-chunk. Ka-chunk. Ka-chunk. Nothing, except a "Wild" symbol almost in the middle window. Breathing in deeply and blowing out like a sigh, I checked out the payout for three Wilds – \$2,400. Wow!

Swoop. Click. Click. Click. Whack. Crank. Whirl. Ka-chunk. One double bar. Ka-chunk. Two double bars. Ka-chunk. Wild. Clink, clink, clink ... The machine started spitting out dollar tokens as I searched the menu for what two double bars and a wild symbol meant. Eighty dollars. The tray was going to be full. While the coins were dropping, I gathered up three tokens and leaned over to the next machine. Clink, clink, clink. Whack and whack. I hit the maximum and spin buttons. Cranking the one-armed bandit had lost its novelty. The reels of the second slot spun. It was a "blazing sevens" icon, three sevens rising out of what looks like the fires of Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles logo. One seven. Two more blazing sevens. Two more sevens. Nothing.

Back at Wild Bars my winnings were scattered all over the tray, although not nearly filling it as I had imagined. I remembered a button that I pushed in Sault Ste. Marie that retained your winnings as credits so you didn't have to keep feeding in the coins each play. No swoop. No click, click, click. I whacked the button and fed a handful of tokens down the coin slot.

Maximum, whack. Spin, whack. Whirl. Ka-chunk. Triple bar. Ka-chunk. Wild. My eyes darted up, two triple bars and a wild pay \$120. Eyes back. Ka-chunk. Wild on the line. "Shit," I said under my breath. Two wilds and a triple bar: \$240.

"It wants to pay," I said out loud to myself as I whacked the buttons and set the reels whirling once again. Concentrate, keep your eyes on the wheels. Ka-chunk. Wild. I felt my heat rise. Bar. Double bar on the line. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. The new sound confused me. Did I win? I looked up to the menu as the slot recorded six electronic credits to the four I still had left. There it was. One wild: six dollars.

Back to the buttons. Whack. Whack. Another two wilds and a third one on the line. Oh, so close. Twenty-four-hundred dollars. Instead I won 12 bucks. So the machine teased me, enticed me with the occasional win and lured me to add more coins. I went back to the change cart three times for another \$300 in tokens.

My faith in Wild Bars faltered after the second trip back to the cart and I started to roam the slot corridors, pumping three dollars in each machine as I passed, staying to play out the ones that let me win a few credits. I was over the clink-clink-clink infatuation. The lucky machines eluded me as I looked from machine to machine for the one that was calling my name. The light on the top of the Wild Cherry machine was flashing. I answered its call.

Clang! I broke my last roll of tokens into the coin tray and swooped a handful of ammunition into the coin slot with one fluid motion. Click. Click. Click. Whap. Whap. Whirl., whirl, whirl. Ka-chunk. Cherry. Ka-chunk. Bar. Ka-chunk. Bar. Fifteen credits.

The only reality able to penetrate my absorption with the one-armed bandits was the two o'clock appointment, likely because it was connected to gambling, to my being able to get back here again. I checked my watch hundreds of times while I played hundreds of games, over and over, winning and losing, winning and losing. As much as I wanted to win, I didn't mind losing as long as I could stay there. I hadn't won a big jackpot, the kind where they came and gave you the money in cash and reset your machine. I was up considerably at one point but I continued to gamble until all the credits were gone and then all of the special slot coins were gone.

One forty-five. Time to go to the interview.

I got in my van and raced along my predetermined beeline to the agency in time for my two o'clock appointment with the job recruiter and her assistant. No Windsor committee. It was just a screening interview. My ego was in full bloom, bolstered by two hours of gambling action. I could do this job standing on my head. I was the

former president of Ontario Downtowns, four years as president of Festivals Ontario, vice-president of the Canadian Association ... blah, blah, blah. I didn't care about the job, I just wanted to gamble.

My blood pressure was still through the roof throughout the interview and I fidgeted in my chair like a schoolboy needing to pee, or worse. Let's get the questions over and get back to the real task at hand, winning back my \$500, along with piles more of Casino Windsor's money. Funny, I didn't even expect I'd get a callback. Too bad. Poor Windsor. It didn't know what it would be missing. I didn't care. I came to gamble.

Another beeline back to the casino. This time it would be different. I could concentrate on the game now that the stupid interview was out of the way. The nerve of them, dragging me all the way down here and not even a member of the board there.

In June of 1996 I was at the apex of my gambling frenzy. I was \$20,000 in the hole to eight different bank accounts. Anxiety and panic attacks swept over me with regularity and my concentration at work and everywhere else was shot. Sweating in bed at night I worried about getting caught, going to jail and having my life defined by the fact that I was a gambler and a thief.

I wondered if I would even make it to the opening of Casino Rama in Orillia. On those late-night drives back home from gambling in Barrie, I worried that I would get caught first, or worse. Desperation weighed me down after three nights of losing at the charity casino, giving me the notion of ramming my van into one of the grey concrete overpasses on Highway 400 during my 23-kilometre ride home at 4:30 in the morning.

All the way back I would talk to myself, cursing my stupidity, my bad luck. Why didn't I quit when I was up? If only I hadn't run out of time. If only they hadn't changed dealers. I was on a roll, then everything changed. Oh, why didn't I quit, take my chips and go home?

The charity casinos closed at 4:00 a.m. Whether I was winning or losing, they closed. The last half-hour was pure insanity, a kind of reverse, bleak "happy hour," where instead of drinking twice as much, you bet with even greater hysteria. If I was down, I needed to get even. If I was up, it was never high enough to cover off all I had previously lost, all that I owed, all that I had stolen.

"Why didn't I go home at two o'clock?" I thought to myself as Sherrie shuffled the deck for the next shoe of cards. If I had, I would have been up a thousand on the night and only \$3,000 in the hole this week. Now I was down \$5,000. How the hell was I going to pay that back by Friday? Those bank deposits had to be made

within a week or else there would be no plausible excuse.

How I hated the shuffle in a charity casino. That break in the action allowed the real world to come reeling into my mind. I'm here to gamble, not think. In a bona fide casino there are lots of distractions during a shuffle; drop a couple of green quarters on number 17 in roulette, slip \$50 into a five-dollar slot machine on the way to the washroom, watch the Asian guys bet \$20,000 a hand in the VIP Baccarat Room, playing a game that amounts to little more than high stakes card-cutting. Here, all I could do was wait.

Michael, the pit boss, knew I was down. Could he see the desperation in my face or did he just do the math? In charity casinos, the action is small enough that the house knows who is winning or losing at all times. Especially VIP players like me.

VIP blackjack: I bet all seven spots on the table, me against the dealer. It was the only way I played now, ever since partnering with Arnold went sour a few months earlier. Nothing really happened, I just couldn't win with him anymore. We'd either both lose or I'd lose alone. Earlier, he saw me at the table and came over.

"Want to play together?" he asked, gesturing at my seven spots, searching for his three. "No," I said, avoiding his eyes. "I'm down. I gotta stay on my own. I haven't been winning lately." "It's okay, it's okay. I'll play over here. Go get 'em." He walked away. I knew he felt bad. Maybe it was recreation to him; maybe he could afford to be nice, but I couldn't. Shit. He taught me the game.

Arnold owned a local golf course and was a regular at the charity casinos when I started playing at them last year. On many nights we were a team, dominating the table, playing like we could do no wrong, stacking up the chips, breaking the house! "You're on fire," one of the guys standing around said. "It's like you can read the cards." Recalling those heady days, it's hard to understand how I could be so down, how I could owe so much money.

"Are you almost ready, Sherrie?" I asked, annoyed with my own angst. "Almost, darling, and I feel a good shoe coming on." Most of the dealers, including Sherrie, liked me. For one thing, they knew me because I sponsored the Stephen Leacock charity casino nights that their company operated. Also, I tipped. On the surface, I was a good loser. I never blamed anyone else, never got mad, swore or threw things like some of the guys. I thought that was an invitation to bad luck, negative vibes and bad karma, that sort of thing. Inside I was screaming. Did they genuinely feel sorry when I lost? I thought so, but that's how they got paid.

Having been on the other side of the table as a sponsor, I knew one hot VIP gambler like me could mean a losing night for the charity casino operators. Sure, that meant the sponsor didn't make any money either, but it really meant the

operator lost because he still had to pay the staff and overhead. In Toronto, and even in Barrie, at the other casino company, they hated to lose and tried all kinds of tricks to stop a player on a roll; some of them I'd have bet were "illegal." Once, at Huronia Casino, a regular player and I were having a good night controlling a table, each of us up several hundred dollars. Then the owner of the company asked if we minded if he dealt for a while. I don't know whether she cared but I sure as hell did. I didn't want to play against the damn owner, but my gambler's ego wouldn't let me say it. I finally quit when I had about \$200 left. I never went back to Huronia's events. These were the types of shenanigans that gave the government the excuse it needed to take over control of all gambling.

Finally, Sherrie was ready for me. I felt tired during the break, but now I was animated, bobbing and weaving, standing in front of the green felt table, my chips lined up along the padded sides. Watching her bury the hole card, I was wide-awake, ready for another round. Ready for redemption.

"Okay, let's do it," I said, and all the worry of the outside world, everything but Sherrie darling, and me and the cards disappeared.

I had two five-dollar chips in each of the seven circles; the maximum \$10 bet allowed in charity casinos. I was really making a \$70 bet per hand but let's not quibble on the fine points. I had 10 piles of five-dollar chips in front of me, \$500, and a pocketful of green quarters, \$25 each. Twenty. I always knew how many. It was another thing I did during the shuffle to keep my mind occupied. They were the remainder from earlier in the evening when I was up a grand.

Snap, snap, snap, snap, snap, snap and snap. Sherrie whacked my first cards beside the circles. My eyes were on her card. Snap. A seven. Good, I had a chance. I feared an ace, of course. Blackjack is an ace and ten; it didn't have to be a jack. I also feared any face card or ten. Now I could watch what she was giving me and the battle was underway.

A king on a queen. "Good," I said, as I waved her off.

"Don't want to split those tens," Sherrie joked as she gave me a three on a four on the next square. "Yuck."

"Hit me," I said, scratching on the green felt with the middle finger on my right hand, the one with the tell-tale Band-Aid covering the dried, cracked skin from too much of this very scratching.

Eight. Fifteen. "Hit me," I scratched.

Queen. Bust. "Oops, sorry," Sherrie feigned as she swooped up those cards with her right hand and slammed them in the crib, deftly sliding my \$10 from that circle

into her tray.

Next came an eight on a face card. "Eighteen." I waved Sherrie off.

Snap. Another three on an eight. Eleven. "Double down," I said as I placed another \$10 at the back of that circle. Another card. Ten. "Yes! That's better, Sherrie, keep it up."

A six on a six. Shit, what do I do? I searched my brain for the computer prompt or the book instruction or Arnold's voice. Always split sixes or is it never split sixes? I couldn't remember.

Sixes against a seven: I split them. It's another all or nothing night. I moved \$10 more to the side of the circle. Another six. "Split," I said and moved another \$10 out.

Nine. Fifteen. "Hit me." Scratch. Four. "Stay." A hand wave on the next hand.

Ten. Sixteen. "Hit." Scratch. Ten. "Too hard." Swoop cards, discard, money slides into Sherrie's tray.

Five. Eleven. "Double down." Another \$10 from my tray.

Jack. Twenty-one. "That's one you're not going to get, missy," I said as I exhaled some anxiety and twisted out a kink in my neck. I could feel the heat in my blood. My throat was dry.

"Don't get cocky," Sherrie said as she slapped a five on my eleven. I paused, knowing what was next as soon as I thought it. Shit. Sixteen, I have no choice. "Hit me."

Seven. Bust. Swoosh, slam, swoop, clink into her tray. I toyed with a cyst on the back of my neck, twisting my back against my other hand. I looked, I am sure, like a straitjacket contortionist.

The sixth spot. A two. A three. Three small cards, it'll be a face.

"Hit," I said and scratched the table. Close, a nine. "Now a face," I said with resignation, regretting the prediction as soon as it passed my lips. Positive, you idiot. Ace.

"I could have used that next, Sherrie," I chided. "Hit me," I scratched.

Ten. Bust. "They're always together, eh?" Sherrie sympathized as she swooped up the cards, and my money, from the table.

My last spot. Another ten. Three. "Ten and three, thirteen," Sherrie said. I looked at

her seven, thinking about what she needed, what I wanted her to have. A ten — she has to stay on seventeen. “Lucky 17,” I murmured out loud, prompting Sherrie to repeat, somewhat sarcastically, “Thirteen!”

The object here was for me not to take the card I wanted her to have. This was the players' advantage in the charity casinos; you could influence the dealer's second card by taking or not taking a card on the anchor spot. When you have several experienced people playing at a table, sometimes the person at the end in the anchor seat would “take one for the table.” In the big casinos, the play is different with the dealer getting both his cards off the mark, taking away this players' edge.

I didn't want a ten. I scratched, “Hit me.”

Six. Another nineteen. Six would have been good for her, giving her thirteen, I thought, second-guessing myself. No, I've seen too many thirteens topped with eights.

“What's it going to be, Dougie?” Sherrie taunted me.

I waved my hand to pass and returned the jab, “Ten, come on, Sherrie, you can do it.”

She turned a four. “Eleven,” my mouth said, but my mind cringed as I took the first shot of the inevitable one-two combination. I looked back at the cards already on the table, grimacing, trying to see but not wanting to think the worst, to forecast the worst. To make it happen. What would have happened if I had given her the six? Seven, six and four. Seventeen. Damn. Now we've had four, six, three. Damn, my mind moaned. Don't say it, don't even think it. But, it was too late: tens are due.

Ten. “Dealer has 21,” Sherrie said succinctly, knowing I was on the ropes.

We “pushed,” or tied, on three hands of 21, meaning I got to keep three \$10 bets. I lost \$70 more.

So it went for the remainder of the shoe and I was down another \$500. My brain couldn't take the torture of watching and waiting for another shuffle so I went over to next table where there were a couple of empty spots and plopped my \$10 chips on each. I was now literally running from my thoughts. I won. I lost. I won. On and on.

Finally Sherrie was ready for me. As we took our positions, aggressor and defender, or the illusion thereof, Michael stepped over and announced “Last shoe.” Closing time.

I couldn't win. I'd had near-perfect shoes before. You can only win about eight hundred dollars. I was already down \$1500 for the night and \$5,500 for the three

days. Despair washed over me. My concentration was gone. Not even the action could keep my wretched feelings at bay. I played a couple of hands on autopilot, hardly knowing what I was saying.

'That's it for me, Sherrie. I'm beat," I said, as I picked up the last of my red chips to head for the cashier's booth before the four o'clock poker crowds. The last thing I needed was a whole bunch of "How much did you win, Little?" questions from those guys.

I had \$240 left. Enough to leave Roberta \$100 on the kitchen table when I went to work, pretending I won, and some money for lottery tickets and Nevada to tide me over until the next weekend's charity casino in Orillia. But what was I going to do about the missing \$6,000 from the bank deposit?

"Maybe I've already won the lottery," I told myself, bolstering my courage for the long, concrete-pillared drive home to Orillia.

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