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First Person Account

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October 24 Was the Day I Took the Drastic Step

The author's name has been withheld on request, and all names have been changed.

—The Editor

Friday, April 7, 2000 was my first meeting with Gen, my gambling counsellor. I could have saved a lot of grief had I seen her sooner, or ended up in a worse predicament, had I waited any longer.

A lot of things were both good and bad for my husband Paul and I that year, and so it was the same with my new pastime: gambling. Prior to the beginning of this year, I was not sure that gambling was, in my case, bad. There were, of course, many factors and excuses leading to my problems. My life had changed—and so did my survival skills. I had retired and remarried, determined to love all of the above.

It is true I chose my new husband, but without realizing it, I married the whole Macho Group in a more real way than I was aware of at the time. Suddenly, I was no longer captain of my own ship. My new family consisted of his seven children, their mates, and my son and his lady. Grandchildren and dogs are

never an issue with me, but there are five and two, respectively. Not relations, but influential on the impact of my new life were Wilhelm, Ursula and Bohdan, the list goes on. My, no, *our* little home had so many huge egos in it that I, the Lion and King of the Castle, became a mouse. This was slow to register with me, but stress signals surfaced; stomach pains, an ulcer, insomnia, loss of joy.

Relief originally came from Paul, although I can't give him all the credit (or blame). He took me to a casino, a totally new experience for me. It did not impress me too much at first, but I learned the rudiments of what happens there. It was "take it or leave it" for some time, but it became a godsend when I needed a diversion to get away from an overbearing situation at home and to regain my car driving skills and my confidence.

The drive from west Toronto via the QEW highway to Casino Niagara became a time to listen to the radio and tapes; the short bus rides from parking lot to casino, a time to talk or listen in on conversations. I would time my trips to counteract what I considered Paul's unfair treatment of me. I now had a way out: the slots.

Paul went up north for the weekend, with Bohdan, his son for the day, then topped it off with golfing. (I would liked to have been included.) No matter, I could gamble by myself; it was safe, inconspicuous, comfortable and time passed.

Paul was often too busy to take me out. He worked on the computer, or watched endless sports on TV. I would have liked more couple stuff. (I used to keep trim and slim by dancing and I miss it so.)

Visits with kids are outings for Paul, but I am new to drinking wine and conversations that often bypassed me and reverted to a language I did not understand. I could go to the casino anytime so I would select times with less traffic, a time of day when my car wouldn't overheat, and I could watch the sunset over the Burlington Skyway. The casino is open 24 hours a day.

It is important to say here that this was quite acceptable to Paul, he was off the hook so to speak. The person hooked was me. At first I went to the casino because it was something to do, then I got to like it, and finally, I had to go. It did not happen over night, or did it? For my birthday, Paul gave me a card with some money to spend at the casino. I went for the evening and stayed past midnight, until morning. This party for one became expensive as did many others.

Paul went through his own traumatic time, his wife was out of control in more ways than could be tolerated. He had many moods. He was often just quiet when he saw how miserable I looked and felt, and would say there was nothing he could say or do. He was relieved when I got home safely. Other times he would do other stuff, be out when I got home or not answer the car phone. We did not discuss our relationship. Paul is not one to verbalize; his anger comes to the surface whenever I suggest a talk.

He did notice however that I did not realize how serious this problem had become—and I didn't. I believed I could control it; I was a strong, principled person. I tried, but I could not go home once I was in the casino. I never felt tired; money did not seem real, just tokens. It was only when I had to take some money from my RRSPs that I realized I needed help.

Typical of the way we were at that time, Paul said he would get me info on gambling on his computer, but he put off doing it. In the meantime I emptied my bank account. I asked Paul to lend me some money. I should not have asked, and he should not have said no. This was probably the first time in my life I had asked for help; usually, if I couldn't get what I needed from my own earnings, I just did without. I felt many things; I was worried, lonely, but mostly, I was unhappy.

Divorce had come up when Paul was angry, even before my gambling. I told him we could go through with it, but my way was not giving up on something as serious as marriage vows. I was still firm in that belief. My resilience was law and this time I told him that his strong personality was too much for me. Divorce may have to happen if all else failed. I did not want anything of his, and he could not have anything of mine. It would have to be final and happen very quickly, not be just a word to use in disagreements. This was a day of emotional upheaval for both of us.

Help came with a phone call to the Problem Gambling Service. I spoke to Gen who explained how I could go and speak to her in confidence as often and as long as it took me to get better. Paul came with me and waited until she met us both in the waiting room. Gen then took me to her office for the first of many hour-long consultations. Gen proved to be just the person for me. We worked together each week making plans about how to get me to slow down and control the obsession—but to no avail. I did not stop gambling until October 2000 when I went to Mohawk Race Track security and registered for self-exclusion. I am certain that I would still visit the slots if I hadn't taken this drastic step.

Paul and I moved to the country, and we developed a new understanding of each other. Divorce came up once, but we both know that our life together is

good, and with mutual respect for each other we can only get happier. I no longer look to Paul to do things with me that he does not enjoy. I have regained my life. I don't allow others to impose on my territory. My personal likes, wishes and feelings are just that —personal—and I share them with discrimination. I have cultivated bonds and respect with most of the family and our friends. I had to distance myself from a couple of people and that too feels good too, because it was necessary.

I am impressed with the achievements of my therapist who helped turn my life around —just as I am incredulous that so much harm penetrated my mature and strong personality. I fantasize about visiting the casino, just as I fantasize about losing weight or winning a lottery, but I hope these things stay as possibilities and that life goes on.

Gen suggested that I have a list of things I can do when I get the old urge to flee, and now I fantasize about these things as well. Come spring (it is now mid-February), I will look for work with animals (my first love). Paul and I will drive to the ocean (my second love). If we don't go together, then I will find a way to do it myself. Other things that I like to do include going to my room, which is totally mine (no one else goes there but me) to read, write and listen to music; going for a walk or car ride. If I'm feeling really frustrated, I can check into a friendly hotel to repair whatever ails me. Closer to home, I now have my space and lots of countryside to gaze at.

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