

first person account

It could be said that gambling affects not just the gambler but the circle of people close to them. This *third-person* account is one such person's effort to understand what might be going on with the gambler.

It felt like forever

“Good evening Sir, please come again”.

As the casino door slammed behind him, Paulⁱ felt an icy shiver. It always seemed that he moved into another dimension when he left there; that the world had changed, that he was in a completely different place. Time moved faster, people weren't as friendly, and all hope was gone. This world was a nightmare, a bitter bottle of wine that left you with a hangover that never went away.

At least he still had a cigarette left. But tonight even that couldn't make him feel better. Receipts fell from his pocket as he walked quickly past the traffic. Cars rushed by him; people were probably driving home to their loved ones. Paul stared into the traffic. Although he felt empty and hopeless, he couldn't help but wish he was one of them. He wanted to be them! He wanted to drive home to his wife and run upstairs to the kids' rooms to give them their good night kisses. He wanted to hug his sister and listen to her grumble about her biology exam. He wanted to feed the cats and walk the dog. He wanted to cut the lawn and serve drinks to his guests out on the patio. He just wanted to be normal.

The cool air was a reminder of where he was headed — right back to his hopeless life, the bitter reality of facing the consequences of his bad choices. *Clink clink clank*. Thoughts running through his head like a train racing in the midnight. *Ding ding ding*. The past few years had been hell for Paul. A hell that he couldn't explain because he never felt that he was part of the destruction. How can you explain something that you feel you have no control over? Yet you are always the one pushing the buttons. Always.

The casino loves you pushing those buttons. But it just gets worse every time. Family and friends constantly pointing fingers at him. Yelling and screaming, crying, and shaking their heads.

“Welcome to the casino Sir. Enjoy your stay”.

Machine sounds fill his mind. *Clink clink clank. Ding ding ding*. He walks fast but he doesn't know where he's going. He can barely see the casino anymore. Where should he go? Traffic is still whizzing past him. A young man gets off the bus and lights up a cigarette. Paul rushes over to the man.

“Hey, can I bum a smoke?”

“Sure. You look like you’ve had a rough night”, jokes the man. He looks like he just got off work. Paul stares at his briefcase.

“Yeah. Something about these rainy cold nights. I dropped my last cigarette a block away”. Paul lies. He lies so much these days he actually believes them. The friendly stranger nods his head.

“Well, have a good night”.

Paul sighs. If only he could ask the man for his life; who cares about the cigarette anymore! What’s the difference? He’s dying anyway, but chuckles at his insanity,

“Excuse me sir. I dropped my life a few blocks away, at the casino. Can I bum one from you?”

Thoughts continue to race through his mind as he walks faster to get away from the rain. The cigarette joins the receipts spilling out of his pocket. Her words are footprints in his mind.

“Paul”, she screams, *“this is it. I told you last time that I was through. Then I even gave you another chance. What is wrong with you! What do we have to do?? I can’t do this anymore. I can’t. The kids don’t even know you. We have no money. I don’t trust you!”*

“I don’t trust you!” Her words shoot through his head. *I don’t trust you.* Lisa was three months pregnant with their third child. Three children and he hadn’t even grown up himself. The rent was two months overdue and the bank card was empty. He was walking home to tell her that he had screwed up again. Or was he...

Paul kicks a stone from beneath his tattered shoe. The rain isn’t as heavy anymore. Paul lights up the cigarette. The sounds of the casino join Lisa’s desperate voice in his head. *Clink Clink Clank... What is wrong with you?... Ding Ding Ding.* Together, they play like an out-of-tune orchestra in his mind. The music would knock a songbird dead. Although far from the casino, his mind is still there. He is still playing the machines. He is still going to the bank for another \$20. He is still avoiding the stares from the casino security. He is still there. A tear rolls down his cheek. He stops in the middle of the street. A payphone isn’t too far away. But his last quarter is back in the casino.

Feeling sad, Paul walks back towards the casino. He needs to call Lisa but his last quarter is in a machine. Then, his heart fills with hope again. His steps aren’t heavy. A smile spreads over his face. An older couple walks by and nods at him. Paul returns their nod with a grin. He walks faster. Soon he can see the casino again. He feels like he is watching the sunrise. Minutes later he is back where he started. The casino staff opens the door for him.

“Good evening Sir. Enjoy your stay”.

Paul smiles. It felt like forever.

Epilogue: For Lisa and the kids, too, “it felt like forever”, but one day Paul did call from a payphone. His counselor also remarked that “it felt like forever”, but Paul did seek help and eventually joined the people in the traffic, rushing home to tuck the kids into bed at night. Most importantly, Paul saw the sunrise, away from thoughts of the casino.

Written by “Lisa”, and dedicated to the “Pauls” out there. This first-person account was written to inform the general public what it feels to be a Paul. Problem gambling can be a devastating disorder, filled with misperceptions and false hope. I know because I once lived with a partner affected by it. I would like to add, however, that there is hope and it is possible to break free from the cycle. I know because Paul eventually became free, and in doing so...so did I.

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ⁱ All names in this First Person Account are fictitious.